

NON-NEGOTIABLE ELEMENTS OF A DEEP YOUTH MINISTRY
WITH AN EMPHASIS ON PRACTICAL APPLICATION

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This dissertation is dedicated to my beautiful wife Angie, and to my incredible daughters, Koral and Willow. Thank you for your love, encouragement, prayers, and patience. You are a blessing and a gift to me.

There has never been the slightest doubt in my mind that the God who started this great work in
you would keep at it and bring it to a flourishing finish on the very day
Christ Jesus appears.

—Philippians 1:6, *The Message*

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ABSTRACT

Youth ministry faces many challenges. But perhaps none as ubiquitous as the challenge to create a ministry that is both enjoyable and interesting to students while, at the same time, encourages them to dig deeper in their faith becoming true disciples of Jesus. This thesis-project presents a vision for the local church, its parents, and its lead youth minister to do just that. Through research done with a large sampling of “Generation Z” students (born between 1995 and 2010) and extensive interviewing of numerous youth ministry and Christian Discipleship experts, it will be clear that this vision is attainable.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING

The primary question of this thesis-project is, “How do today’s youth ministries become transformed from a superficial ‘babysitting’ type of program to a deeper, more intentional ministry of discipleship?” In other words, how do we create youth ministries that are still attractive to students and, at the same time, encourage and inspire them to grow deeper in their faith? It is no secret that youth ministry, in a lot of church settings, is seen as the runt on the totem pole and youth ministers themselves are seen as “lone rangers.” Youth pastors are often asked if they are ever going to become “real pastors” and they are often viewed as the renegades on the church staff. And although this is tragic, oftentimes this is of their own doing. They create a youth ministry world that is filled with games, sports, pranks, lock-ins, road trips, practical jokes, and other practices they consider “cutting edge” while continuing to be seen as “big kids.” When the opportunity is given to prove the naysayers wrong, they often fall short because of their lack of organizational skills, their childish approach, and/or their inability to perceive what a higher standard of excellence might look like. Add to all of this an ignorance of authentic theology and/or a shallow understanding even of their own denomination’s theology, and you have a recipe for disaster. Unfortunately, this is often the culture in which today’s youth ministry finds itself.

For a better way, a shift needs to be made to advance the typical church youth program from its current state of ineffectiveness to a more productive, fruitful position of strength, depth, significance, and health. According to the latest national survey of the National Center for Family Integrated Churches, “Fifty-five percent of American Christians are concerned with

modern youth ministry because it's too shallow and too entertainment-focused, resulting in an inability to train mature believers.”¹ It seems that a majority of teenagers abandon their faith shortly after their high school graduation ceremonies.² This heartbreaking reality is not lost on most youth ministers today.

Ministry Setting

Suntree United Methodist Church in Melbourne, Florida has had a long history of providing a full-time youth minister for their young people. The current youth pastor has been serving there for over 18 years. In all, Suntree UMC’s youth pastor has been in full-time youth ministry for nearly 35 years. He considers it a privilege and an honor to have answered his calling into youth ministry and to have served Jesus Christ in this way. He believes that the incredible stories of life change and personal transformation far outweigh the many, many challenges associated with such a calling. All in all, the youth minister fully embraces, with gratefulness, the joy that is his because of the vocation he has chosen. Doing youth ministry for so many years has brought with it a great deal of eye-opening lessons and experiences.

Suntree United Methodist Church currently enjoys approximately 150 students in attendance on a regular basis. These students are relatively evenly divided into one of two separate ministries. Middle school students spend three years involved primarily with the EDGE youth program while high school students spend four years at LOFT. Over the past 18 years, SUMC has had the joy of watching student after student walk through their ministries and then

1. Abby Carr, “Youth Groups Driving Christian Teens to Abandon Faith,” *Charisma News*, October 22, 2013, accessed May 30, 2016, <http://www.charismanews.com/us/41465-youth-groups-driving-christian-teens-to-abandon-faith>.

2. David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church ... and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 24.

graduate to go on to their next chapter in life. Although they are genuinely able to cheer and applaud the many, many successes they have had, the sad truth is that many of these students enter into a “non-youth group world” that is overwhelming and, oftentimes, devastating. They are bombarded by worldly, non-Christian influences that have a cataclysmic impact on their lives and the Christian faith. When these students are ill-equipped to handle the “real world,” the results can be such that they walk away from their faith and from the church. The best thing the church can do is prepare them to face the rest of their lives as growing, functioning disciples of Jesus Christ and participating members of the local church. How do churches and youth ministries do that?

Not too long ago a blog was written entitled “3 Common Traits of Youth Who Don’t Leave the Church.”³ In essence, the article addressed three very strong points, things that the church should do to ensure that their young people would remain connected to the local body. It was an excellent, hard-hitting essay. At the end of the blog, which confirmed much that was already known, there were a few comments. It was anticipated that there would be many who wrote in to agree with the article and applaud the writer, and themselves, for postulating what was already known. That was not the case. One comment was eye-catching. In part, the commenter expressed the following:

These articles keep popping up all over the place in my feed and I find it so interesting. You see I am one of those kids. I am one that was raised in a very Christian home and now am definitely not a believer. I was very involved in my church. I sang up front many, many Sundays. I helped out in the nursery. My entire social life was wrapped around the church. That was all I knew. I loved God. I read the Bible cover to cover many, many times. I prayed fervently on the constant [sic]. I witnessed to those around me. I published a Christian girl's online magazine/newsletter. I served at the nursing home about once a month. I went to Africa with the Jesus Film. I was the definition of “youth that don't leave the church.” You say it's not a formula and yet you basically endorse it as if it is. I'll just say in my case, I am a naturally very curious person. And I had questions

3. Jon Nielson, “3 Common Traits of Youth Who Don’t Leave the Church,” FaithIt, July 28, 2014, accessed November 1, 2018, <http://www.faithit.com/3-common-traits-of-youth-who-dont-leave-the-church>.

about Christianity that apparently are not really encouraged to be asked. I found a huge gap between Christianity and authenticity. I left because it wasn't real to me anymore.⁴

This comment was both intriguing and disturbing. She didn't say anything in the reflection that could be pointed out as something that went particularly wrong. Instead, she clearly had been deeply immersed in her church and church's youth ministry, claimed to be a devoted Christian, was very active, served in the mission field and was, by all accounts, a leader among her peers. Perhaps nothing went "wrong," but certainly she is not living the life, nor proclaiming beliefs, that would please those who are in ministry.

In the third chapter of the book of John, a Jewish leader named Nicodemus confronts Jesus. He came to Jesus in the night to address a confusing intellectual conundrum. Jesus knew exactly what it was Nicodemus needed to hear:

Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit."⁵

What Jesus addresses here is what every youth program needs to address: the conversion experience. A deeper youth ministry will not neglect the hard work (and the incredible privilege) of taking young people into the "space" where a true, life-changing conversion to Christ can occur. Without a conversion, also known as "regeneration," many youth programs become nothing more than mere recreation centers for young people.

4. Deb Hutchinson, comment left on Nielson, "3 Common Traits," January 28, 2015.

5. John 3:3-6. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture citations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV).

Once a young person is “born again” into the family of God, the discipleship process, known as “sanctification,” begins. These two elements, conversion and discipleship, mark the primary launching points for a deeper youth ministry.

Is there a way to make this happen? Is there a way to do youth ministry that will encourage young people to embrace Christianity and a life devoted to loving and serving Jesus in such a way that they would never fall away from it?

The Context of the Project

As was mentioned earlier, the Youth Pastor at Suntree United Methodist Church has been serving there for nearly 19 years. When he first arrived at the church, it appeared that things were really flourishing and the youth ministry was vibrant. Suntree UMC had a large number of students and adult volunteers involved already and he was hired to take things to the next level. His very first week was actually a week with over 200 students and adults at their very own self-grown and created summer camp. From the outside observer, and to the Youth Pastor at first, this was an amazing experience. But as the week passed, he began to realize a few things that created an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. Although they had a lot of kids, a wonderful worship band, a talented guest speaker, and all the essentials of an outstanding summer camp experience, beneath the surface there was a lot to be desired.

The first thing he noticed was a clear disconnect between the adults and the students. Although adults were in attendance at the camp, they did not seem to be very involved or associated with the kids. Second, he realized that there was a great deal of fun and games. They had a morning game time, an afternoon game time, and an evening game time. The music was not as “worshipful” as it was fun to do and sing. There certainly was a didactic element to the fun

and the music, but this was, for the most part, lost on the students. There was very little that seemed to separate this week from the typical non-Christian camping experience. Third, he witnessed a great deal of “fun” that was being unofficially had between the students when the adults were not around. Most of this “fun” was borderline cruel and basically resembled college fraternity hazing. The final incident came on the last night. It was a very emotional night, particularly as it pertained to the students, and there was a lot of crying, hugging, and reconciliation. Now at first, this may seem like a very good thing, and it certainly was. But what was observed, and learned later, was this outpouring of emotion was the result of years of anguish, frustration, anger, and divisiveness that had been growing among students in the ministry. It was shocking to observe. Very little was directed that night toward God. It was really a rally of students who had been hurt, or who had hurt others, desperately trying to find some peace and forgiveness. Again, this was good and needed, but how and why did it get to this point?

It was later learned that there was a great deal of animosity between the staff and the previous full-time youth minister. She had been fired several months earlier and then filed a lawsuit against the church. A settlement was made, but a great deal of loss and damage had been incurred, and the students were the ones who were paying the price.

How had this large church of over 1500 in attendance on Sunday mornings and this very large youth ministry gotten so far off track? The first conclusion the Youth Pastor came to was that, although seemingly very effective, the ministry was stuck in an old-school way of doing things. It strongly emphasized the “fun and games” philosophy and facilitated a narcissistic “me-first” approach. The students were not being disciplined and were not challenged to dig deeper in their faith. As a result, there was a great deal of fighting, inappropriate games and pranks, a

disdain for the church and corporate worship (the students all sat off to the side on Sunday mornings and were literally to be “seen and not heard”), and a lack of community, love, and what the New Testament church called *koinonia*. It took nearly one year to begin to “right the ship” and nearly three years to begin to move the youth ministry in the direction the Youth Pastor believed it needed to go. Needless to say, there were many, many growing pains.

The first thing that was done was a complete change to their approach and methodology of doing youth ministry. This was a huge undertaking. Again, it appeared that the youth ministry at SUMC was highly successful, so making a large change was not going to come without some battles. The primary shift was this: the intentional move from being an “outreach and fun-oriented” ministry to a “discipleship, missions-minded” ministry. It took over two years to get this in place. The youth minister and his leadership staff met with their large team of student leaders and brought them on board (some of those students were very reluctant). They discontinued creating their own summer youth camp and made plans to do more service and missions during the summer months. This was monumental. One year, Suntime UMC had taken as many as 235 students and adults to their summer camp. Stopping this “sacred cow” was truly an uphill battle, but the right thing to do. Currently, Suntime takes 50-75 students to another ministry’s summer camp, which may seem counterintuitive. In actuality, this now allows them to take 30+ students concurrently on an international mission trip, and 60+ students on two domestic mission trips. In addition, instead of doing their own youth camp, they have created their own “summer youth local mission” experience that attracts students from other churches, other states, and nearly 150 of their own people. This is just the beginning of the changes that are being implemented at Suntime.

Two Significant Assumptions

The theme of this thesis-project is to explore what it means to have a “deep youth ministry.” To do that, there will be ten, primary “non-negotiable” elements that will be addressed. The first assumption will focus on the person of the youth minister as a disciple of Christ, with a focus on beliefs and works or lifestyle. What does it look like to be the leader of a “deep youth ministry?” The second assumption will explore, in practical terms, the remaining nine elements. These remaining elements will unveil what it means to do youth ministry in such a way that young disciples emerge, not merely “youth group junkies.” What has to happen in a church to foster an environment that develops a deeper youth ministry? It is the contention of this thesis writer that the two primary foci are to be on these two components: the youth minister and the nine practical elements.

And then, the nine other “non-negotiable” practical elements will be articulated and challenged. An extensive survey was given to young people who are living this out as best as they can. The results were evaluated and critiqued. Did these elements live up to their billing? That was given a good, hard look. In addition, a dozen well known “Christian discipleship leaders” were contacted and asked to give their personal feedback on this endeavor. What is it that they believe are the most important aspects of a deeper youth ministry?

Thesis-project Direction and Results

As a result of this work of transforming the youth ministry at Suntree UMC, some key observations have been made that have led to significant conclusions. Those conclusions and consequent changes will be borne out later in this project.

This thesis-project should prove to be eye-opening and extremely helpful. There are a variety of factors that are to be adhered to in order to develop and grow a youth ministry that disciples young people and helps them to live deeper, transformed lives—the kind of ministry that will launch young people into the future prepared for life as a growing, blossoming, and powerful disciple of Jesus. As Dallas Willard confirms, “The greatest issue facing the world today, with all its heartbreaking needs, is whether those who, by profession or culture, are identified as ‘Christians’ will become disciples – students, apprentices, practitioners – of Jesus Christ, steadily learning from him how to live the life of the Kingdom of the Heavens into every corner of human existence.”⁶

In addition, another primary outcome of this thesis-project will be to continue to shift the way ministry is done at Suntree United Methodist Church and to set an example for other youth ministries in the local church.

How is all of this going to happen? There will be two crucial elements introduced to help in the discovering and in the formulating of all conclusions. The first will be a research project done with deeply committed Christian students who are either graduates of a vibrant youth ministry or who are currently engaged in a vibrant youth ministry. These students will be purposely selected to participate in an in-depth survey with the intention of discovering those qualities that helped to shape and lead them in the way of Jesus Christ. The survey will be extensive and comprehensive to gain a deeper understanding of the particulars that ushered these students along as young disciples of Jesus.

The second central element will be an attempt to dig into the heart and mind of 12 youth ministry and Christian discipleship authorities, who are well known and respected, in the hope of

6. Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2006), 14.

discovering what they believe are the very key elements to growing and maintaining a deeper, vibrant, disciple-producing youth ministry. These men and women will all be contacted personally by the author of this project to, hopefully, begin a brief, ongoing conversation about the thesis-project topic. This should prove to be a fascinating look into the beliefs and praxis of these professionals with the potential of discovering a wealth of pertinent information.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

It is clear that for one to develop a deeper youth ministry in the Christian faith, a multifaceted and solid, deeply foundational, biblical and theological framework must be created. If this does not occur, there is a good chance that the ministry will become, or remain, shallow and superficial. One of the primary objectives of this thesis-project is to make absolutely certain that everything that is done, and any and all conclusions made, are strongly based on, and supported by, biblical efficacy. This quest can be daunting and challenging. The Bible is certainly full of stories, passages, individual verses and overarching themes and lessons that can lend cursory, as well as overwhelming support to this, but the challenge will be to home in on those that are most pertinent and appropriate for this project.

Spiritual Maturity

What does it mean, exactly, to be a spiritually mature, Christ following, disciple of Jesus? In other words, what does a deep youth ministry which is helping to develop deeply committed young Christians, look like? This Thesis-Project proposes to take young followers of Jesus to a deeper level of discipleship and Christian maturity. When that does occur, what will be the result?

In the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus is quoting as saying the following:

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest

commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”¹

The initial question regarding the greatest commandment, posed by a teacher of the law and probably a Pharisee, was asked in an attempt to trip Jesus up. The person asking the question was most likely an expert in the law and legal matters. Jesus’ response comes first from Deuteronomy (part of the Shema) and other portions of the Old Testament. D.A. Carson, in the *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, writes, “The two commandments, Jesus says, stand together. The first without the second is intrinsically impossible, and the second cannot stand without the first—even theoretically—because disciplined altruism is not love. Love in the truest sense demands abandonment of self to God, and God alone is the adequate incentive for such abandonment.”² In part, Jesus’ response is proclaiming that a true disciple is one who has set aside all personal thoughts, hopes, and desires to follow Jesus and his teachings. A complete and total abandonment of self. Although this is a life-long journey and requires some time, it is still a reasonable expectation even today, and even among this younger generation. A deeper youth ministry will begin to teach this to its young followers and their lives will be, consequently, shaped by this. It is not too far-fetched to see this happening even in the lives of young people.

As this does begin to happen in the lives of young people involved in an intentionally deeper youth ministry, what does this, in practical terms, begin to look like? In his book, *Head, Heart & Hands: Bringing Together Christian Thought, Passion and Action*, Dennis Hollinger begins to tackle this question:

What we need today, in a fragmented world, is a whole faith of the head, heart and hands, with each dimension feeding and sustaining the others. After all, God has created us as whole beings so that the three dimensions are just that—three dimensions of our unified

1. Matthew 22:34-40.

2. D.A. Carson, “Matthew, Mark, Luke,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House), 464.

selves. It is in the joyous consort of our whole selves that we begin to experience God's design for our lives. And it is precisely this model that Jesus exemplified in his life and ministry.³

In essence, Hollinger is saying that it is too often the case that Christians live fragmented lives without a unification of the heart, head, and hands. An authentic follower of Jesus with a deeper commitment to true discipleship and Christian, spiritual maturity recognizes this and endeavors to live in a unified whole. This will invariably be recognized in a true disciple, even one at a younger age.

Head

The first of Hollinger's three faith perspectives is the Head (i.e.; knowledge, information, cognition, understanding). Hollinger contends that many Christians have a faith in Christ that is primarily grounded in the intellect. These Christians read the scriptures to gain a deeper, more clear understanding of who God truly is but not so much to be "moved to action or inward affections."⁴ Head knowledge is certainly an important aspect of the Christian life, but as Hollinger points out, if that is the only aspect which is addressed, it will leave the young disciple incomplete.

Hollinger continues this train of thought:

From the faith of the head perspective, conversion is seen primarily as a transformation of thinking, with old idolatries and commitments giving way to new perspectives. The Christian life is a growth in knowledge, mediated through the Word of God. The primary goal of life is to cognitively know and defend the Christian understanding of reality. Mastery of the Bible and theology are the most important elements in spiritual development.⁵

3. Dennis Hollinger, *Head, Heart & Hands: Bringing Together Christian Thought, Passion and Action* (Downers Grove, MI: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 16

4. Hollinger, *Head, Heart & Hands*, 18.

5. Hollinger, *Head, Heart & Hands*, 18.

A true follower and disciple of Jesus recognizes that the head is only a part of Christian maturity. A deeper youth ministry will aim to teach and lead students along a path that leads to a faith that not only contains “head knowledge,” but also is complete in the other two areas. One of the primary objectives of the youth ministry program at Suntree United Methodist Church is to help nurture and grow “complete” Christians. Having a deep understanding of the scriptures and theology is certainly a vital part of that. But it is only one part!

Heart

The second of Hollinger’s three faith perspectives is the Heart. Hollinger writes, “Advocates for a faith of the heart see Christianity primarily in terms of feelings, passion, affections and deep spiritual experiences. Faith is understood as an inward, mystical or emotional encounter with the living God.”⁶ And this, like the “Head” perspective is still a beautiful component of the Christian life. It is good to have emotional and passionate feelings about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. To read and understand the Bible, not so much for cognitive growth and/or understanding, but rather to have one’s heart moved and warmed and molded by God is necessary.

To address, and in part, answer the question asked at the beginning of this chapter; “what does a deep youth ministry which is helping to develop deeply committed young Christians, look like?” it is important to speak to this aspect of spiritual maturity. A young disciple of Jesus is not only becoming more and more intellectually grounded and mature, but he or she is also becoming increasingly more passionate about his or her faith. There is a warmth about the young person that can be seen by others. Jesus is quoted in John 3:21 as saying, “By this everyone will

6. Hollinger, *Head, Heart & Hands*, 21.

know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Having our hearts moved and changed by God is a clear witness to the world that we are true followers of Christ. The youth minister at Suntree United Methodist Church purposes plans varying aspects of the youth program to address the heart. As a part of the youth ministry program, it is not unusual for the teens to have intentional 20-minute quiet times alone with God, opportunities to share “up front” how God is moving and changing their lives, creative writing opportunities to tune in to what God is doing in their hearts, and more. These are all done to help students dig a little deeper into the “heart” aspect of their faith. A deeper, more mature student will graduate the program with a relatively deep, cognitive understanding of God, the Bible and theology along with a passionate, moving, and emotional component as well.

Hands

The third of Hollinger’s three faith perspectives is the Hands. Hollinger writes, “A faith of the hands does not deny the head and the heart but emphasizes that human action is the starting point in Christian responsibility and the most significant sign of a genuine relationship with God.”⁷ Again, this component is a beautiful part if it is indeed a healthy part of the whole: Heart, head, and hands. By itself advocates for this type of faith emphasize action and doing over any emotional or intellectual standpoint. The emphasis is not on beliefs, biblical doctrine, passionate feelings, or being “moved by the Holy Spirit.” Rather, it is a faith based on expressing oneself outwardly through serving, evangelism, acts of justice, etc.

This is unquestionably an important component to a deep youth ministry. At Suntree United Methodist Church, there are many planned aspects of the ministry to get young people to

7. Hollinger, *Head, Heart & Hands*, 193.

do just that. The ministry has numerous opportunities to serve outside of the United States, inside the boundaries of the United States, and even in the local community. There is a clear acknowledgement that being a disciple of Jesus is more than just a cognitive and/or emotional idea. It must also include action. Jesus told his followers in Matthew 23:11, “The greatest among you will be your servant.”⁸ Jesus very clearly conveyed that servanthood was a foundational part of being one of his followers.

Head, Heart and Hands Together

What will a growing, relatively spiritually mature, young Christ following disciple, really look like? The answer, to some degree, is found in the faith of all three components working together as a whole. Hollinger concludes,

A Christian faith of the head, heart and hands holds forth the best option for meeting these deep longings in our age. Bringing our minds, deepest passions and actions together into a harmonious whole with Christ at the center has the potential to be a powerful witness to a world that has lost its way amid the cacophony of voices and laments in our time. The joyous consort stands apart from any other compelling paradigm—whether it be from pop psychology, fad spiritualities, traditional religions or academic disciplines—in pointing the way to truth, humanness, mercy, justice, wholeness and divine restoration. It comes through the One who in the incarnation embodied all that we are meant to be and now calls us to love the Lord our God with head, heart and hands.⁹

The hope and dream of a deep youth ministry is to have students graduate with a faith that is informed by scripture, moved by the Holy Spirit and grounded in the head, heart and hands. The graduate would be a true disciple who knows and understands a reasonable portion of the Bible, is passionate and energetic in his or her faith, and is eager to serve, help, work, and truly be servants of our Lord and Savior Jesus.

8. Matthew 23:11.

9. Hollinger, *Head, Heart & Hands*, 27.

Transformation

In essence, the final outcome of a deep youth ministry and, therefore, a deeply committed and growing young disciple, is found in the understanding of the word “transformation.” The Bible is replete with references to, and stories about, Christ-like transformation. Many of those references have been addressed already in this Thesis project.

In the book of Colossians, Paul expresses his love and interest in the church and he addresses a few problems that the church people were facing. Primarily, the Christians there were being barraged by some false teachings and it was a threat to the church and to their faith. The book is a transformational book, but chapter three really hones in on the importance for the Jesus follower to understand exactly what that means. Paul exhorts his friends at the church of Colosse to embrace the absolute sufficiency and supremacy of Christ Jesus. In doing so, they would be able to thwart the false teaching and become more spiritually mature disciples.

Paul writes in the first part of chapter three the following: “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.”¹⁰ First, Paul addresses the heart of the Christian. Curtiss Vaughn, in the *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, writes, “To set the heart on things above is to desire and to strive for those things. It is to see to it that one’s interests are centered in Christ, that one’s attitudes, ambitions, and whole outlook on life are molded by Christ’s relation to the believer, and that one’s allegiance to him takes precedence over all earthly allegiances.”¹¹ A deep youth

10. Colossians 3:1-3.

11. Curtiss Vaughan, “Colossians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 11: Ephesians through Philemon*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House), 209.

ministry will create the space for young people to have their hearts transformed by Christ in such a way that they will actually seek after such things. This will, in many ways, begin to make them different from the rest of the youth culture. Paul also addresses the mind in this chapter. Again, Vaughn writes, “To set the mind on things above has, among other connotations, that of giving such things a large place in one’s thought life—seeing to it that the bent of the inner nature, the governing tendency of thought and will is toward God.”¹² The heart and now the mind of the young disciple are interested most deeply in the ways of Jesus. That is the goal of the deeper youth program.

And then Paul adds this, “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”¹³ This is a beautiful declaration. Often Christians, primarily those who are younger in the faith, look for principles of Christian living by which they can try to guide their lives by. A list of “do’s and don’ts” and/or a compilation of “good things to do”, and “bad things to avoid.” Paul, on the other hand, presses right through the seemingly immature Christian platitudes and addresses a deeper, more compelling way to live as Christ followers. He essentially says that spiritually mature Christians live in a way that is suitable for all aspects and situation in life. They are to be deeply entrenched in the freedom and knowledge that Christ gives so that they are not encumbered by societal, or so-called biblical rules, laws and regulations.

This is the goal of the deeper youth ministry and what a student who graduates from such a ministry will look like and live like.

12. Vaughan, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 209.

13. Colossians 3:17.

Biblical Support - The Youth Minister

The youth minister is to be the leader of the quest. The youth minister must be a person who not only is able to articulate this process, but he or she must embody it, must live it daily. Anyone and everyone associated with this leader must be able to affirm unequivocally and declare that this particular Christian is indeed a devoted Christ follower.

Near the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus implores his followers to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."¹⁴ What does it mean to truly be a disciple? Dan Kimball, in his book, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations*, addresses this question:

In Greek, the word disciple is the noun *mathetes*, which is found 269 times in the New Testament and means "a pupil, an apprentice, an adherent." The verb form, *matheteuo*, occurs four times in the Gospels and once in Acts. It means, "to be or become a pupil or a disciple." If our mission is to make disciples of Jesus and the word disciple means to be a student, pupil, or apprentice of Jesus, how will we approach this role in the emerging culture? Dallas Willard, in his book *The Divine Conspiracy*, explores the shift away from a subtle works-based form of discipleship, which focuses on modern methodology, and draws us toward a whole new level of kingdom living that is based on being a student and an apprentice of Jesus. In a conversation with me once, he explained that "a disciple of Jesus is one who practices his presence and arranges his or her life in such a way as to live as Christ would live if he were them."¹⁵

The youth minister is to be an apprentice and disciple of Jesus Christ and is to live his or her life as Jesus himself would live it. Mike Yaconelli, in his book, *Dangerous Wonder: The Adventure of Childlike Faith*, affirms this, as only he can, by stating,

Jesus Christ came to rescue us from listlessness as well as lostness; He came to save us from flat souls as well as corrupted souls. He came to save us from dullness. Our culture is awash in immorality and drowning in dullness. We have forgotten how to dance, how

14. Matthew 28:19-20a.

15. Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for Emerging Generations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 214.

to sing, and how to laugh. We have allowed technology to beat our imaginations into submission and have become tourists rather than travelers. Television dominates our time, alters our values, numbs us to life in all of its wildness. We have been stunted by mediocrity.¹⁶

Yaconelli puts it so well and, in a lot of ways, since the writing of his book, things have gotten even worse. Students are captivated by what seems to be a never-ending onslaught of technology and social media influences. But the glowing example of the youth minister who lives life the way Jesus himself would live is a powerful example to the Christian faith. It is perhaps the most powerful and influential element in a youth leader's ministry to young people.

This life change, or transformation, or perhaps better yet, sanctification/regeneration, speaks volumes to those young people who are in the youth minister's world. The impact on them can be extraordinary, as it well should be. We see this borne out in the life of C. S. Lewis. In his book, *The Question of God: C. S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud Debate God, Love, Sex, and the Meaning of Life*, Armand M. Nicholi, Jr. writes,

Lewis changed from a wary introvert with very few close friends to a personable extrovert with scores of close friends and colleagues. George Sayer, biographer who knew Lewis for some thirty years and Owen Barfield a close friend for over forty years describe Lewis after his conversion: "He was unusually cheerful and took an almost boyish delight in life." They describe him as "great fun, an extremely witty and amusing companion, considerate, more concerned with the welfare of his friends than with himself."¹⁷

Nicholi then asks the question; "Why the change?" He then goes on to give three answers, the first of which is most pertinent to this writing. He adds,

As a Psychiatrist, I suggest three factors. First, as Lewis began to read the Old and New Testaments seriously, he noted a new method of establishing his identity of coming to terms with his real personality. This process, Lewis writes, involves losing yourself in

16. Mike Yaconelli, *Dangerous Wonder: The Adventure of Childlike Faith* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1998), 24.

17. Armand M. Nicholi, Jr., *The Question of God: C. S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud Debate God, Love, Sex, and the Meaning of Life* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 2002), 115.

your relationship to the Creator. Until you have given up yourself to him, Lewis writes, you will not have a real self. In particular, Lewis paid attention to the New Testament verse “whoever loses his life for my sake, will find it.” He turned outward instead of inward to find himself.¹⁸

The youth minister can have numerous degrees, be wildly talented, be a man or woman of integrity, and possess great upfront speaking and entertainment capabilities, but if students do not see the compelling life of Jesus in his or her life, then the ministry is doomed to mediocrity. A deep, transformational youth ministry starts first and foremost with its youth minister.

The Scriptures have a lot to say about the characteristics necessary for the type of leadership in a deeper youth ministry. What follows is a short discussion of several of these passages and the core concept each addresses that would benefit a youth minister. Without these key core concepts, the church and the church’s youth ministries will struggle to move from being shallow, cursory, and ineffective to becoming valuable, disciple-making, ministries.

First, the youth minister must cultivate and continue to develop an ongoing, deepening relationship with Jesus Christ. Paul writes in Philippians 2:12-13; “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.”¹⁹ Paul was adamant that friends of his who called themselves Christ followers were to be proactive in their pursuit toward Christian maturity. Now this can be an ironic and peculiar endeavor. Scripture is clear that faith without works is dead,²⁰ and it is through faith that believers are saved.²¹ So the depth and/or veracity of

18. Nicholi, *The Question of God*, 115.

19. Going forward, all Scripture citations are taken from the NIV translation unless otherwise noted.

20. James 2:17.

21. Ephesians 2:8.

a person's faith commitment is difficult to see, and it is certainly not to be equated with a checklist of "dos and don'ts." But, and here's the beautiful paradox, it is this faith that manifests itself in and through behaviors. So, there is certainly a group of behaviors that can serve as "evidence" and a road map to a deeper Christian life. The life of the youth minister is to be the life of a transformed, and transforming, person.²² This transformation should, therefore, demonstrate itself in a variety of ways. Accordingly, this transformed, discipleship life should be characteristic of, but not limited to, the following: intentional scripture reading and study, an interactive and conversational prayer life, a genuine love for God, self, and others, active participation in the life of the local church, calculated acts of service and missions, financially tithing and/or giving, a desire to tell others about Christ, and a genuine and authentic joy, peace, and contentment.²³ The youth minister who does this will model what it means to live as a Christ-follower for their students. As John clearly communicates in John 3:21, "But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God." In addition, the youth minister will become more and more energized and enthusiastic about progressing in their ministries.

Second, the youth minister must be truly authentic in his or her approach to life and ministry. In his first book, the Apostle Peter writes these words: "These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."²⁴ Truly,

22. Romans 12:2.

23. Romans 1:20; 2:14-15; Jeremiah 33:3; Ezekiel 22:30; Luke 10:22; Ephesians 4:13-24; Matthew 28:19-20; 2 Corinthians 9:6-8; 1 Peter 3:15; Philippians 4:4-8.

24. 1 Peter 1:7.

when the leader of a ministry is seen to have a genuineness of faith, it is an appealing and attractive attribute.

A person who claims to be a Christ follower and yet is perceived to be inauthentic and artificial will undoubtedly leave some people confused. There are few things that turn young people away from the faith more so than showing a lack of authenticity. Thom Rainer, in his book *The Millennials*, writes, “Millennials smell ‘fake’ a mile away. They know when people aren't being real and sincere.”²⁵ On the other hand, genuine faith lived out in authenticity is a certain draw to the faith. Youth ministers do not need to be perfect or faultless or without issues, but they do need to be real, particularly as it concerns their faith. The youth minister at Suntree United Methodist church was initially drawn to Christ by observing the genuine love and joy he, as a young person, saw in his youth minister.

Third, the youth minister must not only understand his or her job description, but must also embrace it with joy, delight, and great enthusiasm. Luke writes, “I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace.”²⁶ When those who are in youth ministry can affirm, along with Luke, this attitude, they will be well along in fulfilling this great calling by God. In addition, youth ministries, along with the students, will be the primary beneficiaries! Meg Lassiat, in her book, *The Christian as Minister: An Exploration Into the Meaning of God’s Call*, confirms this in writing, “For those who respond to a particular form of servant leadership, the word ‘call’ expresses something that is uniquely different for each

25. Thom S. Rainer, *The Millennials: Connecting to America’s Largest Generation* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2011), 161.

26. Acts 20:24.

individual and something that hopefully leads to a vocation which theologian Frederick Buechner described as where one's greatest joy meets the world's greatest need."²⁷

No doubt this is a primary reason why so many in full-time youth ministry experience what is commonly referred to as "burn out." Their calling has become a "job" and they no longer realize at a deep, deep level that they are actually invited by God to carry out this purpose in their life. Granted, there are seasons, perhaps, of unrest and disillusionment, but the overarching belief should always be that this calling into youth ministry is a high calling and a high privilege and it is to be done with great love, purpose, and passion. When this is true at a deep level, great things begin to happen. Dick Staub, in his book *The Culturally Savvy Christian: A Manifesto for Deepening Faith and Enriching Popular Culture in an Age of Christianity-Lite*, writes,

God's transforming presence will change us, not so we can transform the world, but so we can experience God's presence more deeply and be restored to God's image more completely. When fully human people do God's will, they move into the neighborhood as a loving, transforming presence, like Jesus did. If there is to be a renaissance of faith and culture, and I pray that there will be, it will be a by-product of God's transforming presence in our individual lives. Cultural enrichment proceeds from enriched individuals, and there is but one aim for our transformation: God intends to transform us from fallen humans to fully human.²⁸

Fourth, the youth minister must live and model a life of love.²⁹ The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, admonishes his friends to live a life of love so that others might "grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ" and that they might "know this love that surpasses knowledge."³⁰ Without demonstrating the love of Christ in everything he/she

27. Meg Lassiat, *The Christian as Minister: An Exploration into the Meaning of God's Call* (Nashville, TN: General Board of Higher Education, The United Methodist Church, 2013), 15.

28. Dick Staub, *The Culturally Savvy Christian: A Manifesto for Deepening Faith and Enriching Popular Culture in an Age of Christianity-Lite* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishing, 2007), 110.

29. Jude 1:21.

30. Ephesians 3:18b-19a.

thinks, does, and says, the youth minister will not be fulfilling their calling as directed in scripture. Love must permeate the life of the youth minister and that must seep deep down into the entire youth program of the church. Otherwise, the church will have nothing more than youth ministries that are fun, teen recreational programs and activities. Again, Paul was adamant about this when he wrote,

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.³¹

Fifth, the youth minister should be a life-long learner. John, in his Gospel, writes, “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”³² To stay sharp and current, youth ministers should always have an eye toward growing and learning intellectually. This not only includes workshops, conventions, seminars, and online training, but more importantly it should also include a strong consideration toward furthering their education. Duffy Robbins writes,

Perhaps most of your previous education has been dominated by the Scarecrow’s lament, “If I only had a brain.” Now, in this new land of youth ministry preparation, there must be attention given to the yearnings of the Lion and the Tin Man. In youth ministry, a

31. 1 Corinthians 13:1-13.

32. John 14:26.

good brain must be joined by a courageous spirit and a warm heart. The reason for this distinct difference from most other academic disciplines is that youth ministry is primarily a theological enterprise. Or, to put it another way, the primary task of youth ministry is to focus on God.³³

Naturally, the first and primary point must focus on the person of the youth minister. If the youth minister does not have the characteristics mentioned above, or is not at least striving to embody them in his or her life, then the following nine non-negotiable elements will prove useless. It is of the utmost importance that the youth minister takes their life, their entire life (mind, body, soul, heart) seriously. Not doing so leads to destruction and a compromised ministry. Chandler Bailey in his article “The Soul of the Youth Worker” writes,

Soul care is a subject many youth workers tend not to pay attention to. However, if you desire to have longevity in ministry, it’s imperative that you pursue it. The subject of soul care has been written about, but it usually focuses on the senior leadership or senior pastors. These leaders carry a heavy weight: research has shown that 1500 to 1800 pastors leave ministry every month due to burnout, moral failure, or conflict in the church. In addition, research has also shown that pastors suffer from depression, diabetes, obesity, hypertension, and other chronic diseases at a rate higher than that of the general population. Although this research focuses on the effects of ministry on the senior pastor, it begs a couple of questions: Are the demands of youth ministry upon a youth worker of a similar weight?³⁴

Romans 12:1-2

Romans 12:1-2 is one of the great passages of the New Testament found in Paul’s most theological book. In it, Paul lays out, in part, God’s great hope and plan of redemption, and then what our response should be. These two verses are tipping points, to some degree, of what the genuine Christian life should really look like. Dallas Willard adds,

33. Duffy Robbins, *This Way to Youth Ministry: An Introduction to the Adventure* (El Cajon, CA: Zondervan, 2004), 18.

34. Chandler Bailey, “The Soul of the Youth Worker,” *Youth Specialties*, May 16, 2016, accessed May 30, 2016, <http://www.youthspecialties.com/blog/the-soul-of-a-youth-worker-2/>.

We enter into each of the teachings of Jesus by choosing different behaviors that are relevant, finding the space – making the arrangements – in our lives to put them into action, and re-visioning the situation in the new behavioral space that includes God. The interaction between new uses of the body and inward re-positioning toward the context is essential. Learning to do what he taught is not just a mental shift without assistance from a modified use of the body, for behavior and life are not mental.³⁵

Somehow the message of the Christian faith has been distorted. Too often the message is centered on “doing good things and/or not doing bad things” as proof of the Christian life. As long as we do not use God’s name in vain too often, and are nice to animals (and attend church), then that’s what it means to be a Christian. A deeper look at what Paul has written here refutes that. And by refuting that, Paul then explains the deeper, truer meaning of the Christian life.

Exegesis and Interpretation of the Text

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

—Romans 12:1-2

For the deeper youth minister, these verses are insightful and teach us a great deal. Everett F. Harrison, a contributing author to *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, writes, “It sets forth the fundamental obligations one must meet before he or she is prepared to face the challenge of living as a believer in this world.”³⁶ Paul uses the word “therefore” as a way of connecting the previous section with what is about to follow. The connection here is with the first eleven chapters of Romans. The first eight chapters essentially lay out the means of

35. Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus’s Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 88.

36. Everett F. Harrison, “Romans,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 10: Romans through Galatians*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House), 126.

salvation and what the basics of the Christian faith are. And then in the next three chapters, Paul articulates God's power and sovereignty over all creation and then clearly communicates in 10:9 that "if you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." These eleven chapters then beautifully lead the way to chapter 12.

In addition, Paul uses the word "urge" (*parakaleō*) which is fascinating in that he is not merely encouraging or instructing his "brothers and sisters," but rather he is pleading with them to take heed to what he is conveying. Again, Harrison writes,

The apostle begins now to "urge" his readers instead of simply instructing them. His choice of this word "urge" (*parakaleō*) is discriminating, seeing that its force lies between commanding and beseeching. It possesses something of the element of authority that is more forcefully expressed by "command," and has in it something of the element of appeal that attaches to "beseech."³⁷

Paul understands the importance and the urgency of his words. This magnificent theological discourse reminds his friends (and us) that this grace God has poured out on his people ought to drive them to live sacrificially and in the service of others. When that is done, it becomes possible then to be "pleasing to God" and have a truer understanding of what real worship is.

How is that done? How do Christ followers present themselves to God in this way? Is it by trying really hard? Is it by effort? Is it by making a list of all the things that should be done and then making sure they are done? Unfortunately, for many Christians and many young people in youth ministries today, they answer those questions with "yes." Students seem to be getting the message that the key to the Christian life is to be good, clean up your act, go to youth group and make sure you're baptized and confirmed. What Paul does next, if deeply understood,

37. Harrison, "Romans," 182.

addresses that. According to Paul everything about a disciple is to be different from the rest of the world. And that is accomplished by “not conforming to the pattern of this world,” which is a decidedly difficult task, perhaps particularly today! Students are bombarded almost relentlessly with the message to fit in and be a fully functioning part of the culture that surrounds them. In fact, it’s almost impossible for them not to do that. Walt Mueller, in his book *The Space Between: A Parent’s Guide to Teenage Development*, writes,

But in today’s you-decide-for-yourself-what’s-right-and-wrong world, peer pressure typically takes the form of an unspoken expectation to participate in behavior that the overwhelming majority of your teen’s peers—and our culture—believes is normal, right, and expected. Take a moment to reread those descriptions of peer pressure then and now. Do you see how different and, therefore, more difficult it is for kids in today’s world? While we must still teach and model right and wrong, it’s important that we do so with sensitivity to the sometimes overwhelming nature of the pressure our kids face.³⁸

Paul adds this admonition in 12:2: “but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” That is the key! That is the key for all Christians, the youth minister, and for their leadership of the youth program. Christians must not merely be “rule followers,” but must be transformed (*metamorphoo*) followers of Jesus. And this transformation process begins with the mind. Now certainly, “mountain top” experiences and moving worshipful times are important, but the transformed life begins with thinking. Paul reminds Christians of that and says so with urgency. Everett Harrison adds, “Aiding this process is ‘the renewing of your mind,’ which seems to mean that the believer is to keep going back in his thought to the original commitment, reaffirming its necessity and legitimacy in the light of the grace of God extended to him.”³⁹ It is when Christians can mentally embrace the saving act of God through Jesus Christ and know that they are

38. Walt Mueller, *The Space Between: A Parent’s Guide to Teenage Development* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 53.

39. Harrison, “Romans,” 128.

restored, redeemed, and saved for a life in heaven for eternity, that they are then able to muster up the courage and strength to offer their bodies as a living sacrifice.

Kent Carlson and Mike Lueken, authors of *Renovation of the Church* continue this train of thought in writing,

Apprentices are learning to turn away from self and bring their kingdom into God's Kingdom. They are learning to let him have say over their lives. As they restructure their lives around him, he gradually transforms their inner being in Christ-likeness. They actually become more like him. They don't obey him because they have to or are trying hard; obedience flows out of the new heart God has fashioned within them.⁴⁰

And when we do this, and allow our students to witness it, we are truly able to lead in our churches and in our church's youth ministries.

Mark 8:27-29

Perhaps this is the single most important question ever asked, and perhaps the single most important question ever to have to answer: "Who is Jesus?" Jesus himself wants his followers to be able to answer this question and any church and/or youth ministry that is passionately developing disciples of Christ strives to answer this as well. It was while traveling that Jesus turned to his disciples and asked them the question: "Who do people say that I am?"⁴¹ Peter, as the spokesperson for the group, gave the answer that has become known now as the Petrine Confession. "You are the Messiah," Peter proclaimed.⁴²

40. Kent Lueken and Mike Carlson, *Renovation of the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 55.

41. Mark 8:27.

42. Mark 8:29.

Exegesis and Interpretation of the Text

Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.”

—Mark 8:27-29

In this passage of Scripture, it appears that Jesus used one question to get to another question. Rumors had been floating around as to who Jesus was. So Jesus took this opportunity to ask his closest, most intimate friends. First, he wanted to know what others were thinking: “Who do people say that I am?” But this was probably his way of getting to the question he really wanted answered. After a short round of reckless answers, Jesus then turned to the disciples and asked them who *they* thought he was. It should not be surprising that Jesus accepted Peter’s answer. Had he not truly been the Messiah, perhaps he would have corrected Peter or tried to persuade him, and the others, in a different direction. But Peter was right on target. D.A. Carson adds, “The Greek word *Christos* (‘Christ’) translates the Hebrew *māšîaḥ* (‘Messiah’) and means the ‘Anointed One’ of God. The word carries with it the idea of chosenness by God, consecration to his service, and endowment with his power to accomplish the task assigned.”⁴³

Adults who know that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God and the hope of salvation lead deeper youth ministries. The fun, the games, and the craziness are all good and, generally, appropriate. When youth ministries lose sight of Christ, and lose sight of the answer to this question, their ministries become nothing more than fun clubs or teen hangouts.

43. D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1976), 694.

Biblical Support – Nine Non-Negotiable Elements

The Youth Pastor at Suntree United Methodist Church has often said that it would be easy for him to come into almost any church and build the youth program to the point where there were many, many students in attendance. Getting kids to show up has never been that difficult (for the youth minister or just about anyone else). Pass out a bunch of flyers around a high school advertising that the youth group is throwing a great party full of lots of food and drinks, and that ministry is probably on its way. Include with that the promise of some things that their parents might not like, and a large group will likely emerge. Perhaps more realistically, create a youth ministry that provides lots of entertainment, lots of food, lots of fun, and as many “cool” kids (or popular kids) as possible, and again a large assembly will very likely be the result. Building numbers is not always that difficult. But, what can be a little more difficult is to get kids to show up consistently and then to challenge them to live a life that is far different from the crowd most of them are hanging around. The difficulty presents itself in inviting them to live a Christ-centered life and, at the same time, compelling them to return the following weeks.

A church that has on its staff a youth minister who loves Jesus, who knows that Jesus is the Messiah, Lord, and Savior, and whose life has been transformed (and is continuing to be transformed), is a church that is poised to do great things for the Kingdom of God. But there are nine more elements that must be in place for true excellence and effectiveness. These nine are not just based on a whimsical way of thinking; rather they are calculated, supported by years of experience, and based on deep Scriptural premises.

Christocentric Ministry

Deeper youth ministry is unashamedly Christocentric. All the hoopla that surrounds most youth ministries (i.e. lock-ins, game nights, pool parties, special events, and more) is to be expected and is acceptable. But there is no substitute for basing the entire ministry on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Dean Borgman, in his book *When Kumbaya Is Not Enough: A Practical Theology for Youth Ministry*, writes,

From our first to our final theological step – including all leaps of faith – we follow Jesus Christ. The good news was proclaimed most clearly and successfully in the incarnation of the Son of God (John 1:1-18). What the Law and the Prophets tried to convey was communicated most successfully by the Son of God (Deuteronomy 18:15-18; John 1:17). We need to understand how difficult it is for young people to clarify their personal identities in today's world and how critical relationships are to them. Then we will understand why our presentation of the faith must be Christocentric rather than bibliocentric or theocentric. Adolescent Christian spirituality should be centered not on an institution but on a relationship with Jesus Christ as Savior, Lord, and friend.⁴⁴

Our students need to know not only “who” Jesus is, but must also learn to fall in love with him. It has to get into the hearts of his followers! Dallas Willard put it this way, “We can say, in a preliminary manner, that spiritual formation for the Christian basically refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself.”⁴⁵ Churches that rely primarily on Sunday school classes, Confirmation, retreats, youth group gatherings, and an occasional “youth Sunday” as measures for their success, fall short of the expectations of a deeper ministry.

Although those things are certainly good, a vital and deep youth ministry is necessarily driven by its quest to make Jesus known, loved, and followed. In his Gospel, John tells the story

44. Dean Borgman, *When Kumbaya Is Not Enough: A Practical Theology for Youth Ministry* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1997), xiv.

45. Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 159.

of Nicodemus and his conversation with Jesus. Toward the end of that conversation, Jesus says to Nicodemus and all who were listening, “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.”⁴⁶

Matthew 28:19

At the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry, he commands his followers to go and make disciples. This command is given because Jesus has “all authority” and this authority is over “everything in heaven and on earth.”⁴⁷ One of the primary challenges with youth programs, and this is often heard *within* the youth program, is the creation of “holy huddles.” It’s an insiders group made for the insiders who have been there for a long time. It is hard for those insider students to do what someone probably did to them: invite them to a youth ministry night. But the Christian faith, although personal and private, is also to be public. One of the callings as a Christ follower is to reach out to those who do not know Christ. Jesus made this very clear at the end of his time here on earth.

Exegesis and Interpretation of the Text

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

—Matthew 28:19

46. John 3:17, 18.

47. Matthew 28:18.

According to D. A. Carson,

Disciples are those who hear, understand, and obey Jesus' teaching. The injunction is given at least to the Eleven, but to the Eleven in their own role as disciples (Matthew 28:16). Therefore they are paradigms for all disciples. Plausibly the command is given to a larger gathering of disciples. Either way it is binding on all Jesus' disciples to make others what they themselves are—disciples of Jesus Christ.⁴⁸

This is straightforward teaching by Jesus that followers are not only to introduce people to him, but are to be about the business of helping new Christians grow deeper in him. A healthy youth program certainly strives to develop an atmosphere, both physically and relationally, where everyone is accepted and safe. A warm, inviting youth room goes a long way to providing that. At the same time, it is easy for students to get into a rut and forget about the duty that is there to invite others into the group. So a part of this healthy ministry is the encouragement to take the risk of inviting peers. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, writes, “How can they hear without someone preaching to them?”⁴⁹ As true disciples of Jesus, Christians have a duty to live out the great commission by being the hands, feet, and mouth of Christ. As Michael Lukaszewski of ChurchLeaders.com writes, “One of the primary reasons every church exists is to share and live the Gospel and invite people to join His kingdom. Since the church is the display of God's glory on earth, and since Jesus said HE would build His church—the church should be central to our lives and faith. So inviting people to your church should be a part of your core mission.”⁵⁰

48. Carson, “Matthew,” 596.

49. Romans 10:14.

50. Michael Lukaszewski, “40 Ways You Can Invite People to Church,” Churchleaders.com, July 9, 2018, accessed November 3, 2018, <http://www.churchleaders.com/outreach-missions/outreach-missions-articles/144975-40-ways-you-can-invite-people-to-church.html>.

Colossians 1:15-20

Although Paul had never visited this church in Colossae, he knew that it was under attack. In Paul's day, and in ours, a proper and accurate understanding of who Jesus Christ is, is paramount. Part of the problem that Paul and this church faced was centered on the question of Jesus' deity. So Paul hit the issue head on!

Exegesis and Interpretation of the Text

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

—Colossians 1:15-20

In essence, there are three very profound and fundamental declarations that Paul makes in this engaging passage. Paul's straightforward approach was a direct assault at the various false teachers and their erroneous beliefs. In this text, Paul addresses the deity of Christ, his relation to creation, and his relation to the church. All three are powerful proclamations made for the people of the church in Colossae, for Christians everywhere, and for us today.

When Paul writes, "The Son is the image of the invisible God," he is not saying that Jesus looks like his Father. In the text, he is not addressing Jesus' physical appearance, rather he is commenting on Jesus' very nature and his character. Known as the "hypostatic union," what Paul is saying here is that in Jesus we have a being who is 100% human and 100% God. Matt Slick adds, "Jesus is God in human flesh. He is not half God and half man. He is fully divine and

fully man. That is, Jesus has two distinct natures: divine and human.”⁵¹ At the same time, if you want to know what God is like, all you have to do is look to Jesus. He is the “exact representation” of God and has shown us how we are to live here on earth, loving God and loving others.⁵²

In addition, Christ is the “firstborn over all creation.”⁵³ With this pronouncement, Paul is saying that Jesus was with God before creation and he created all that has been created, and it was all created for him! Again, Paul is continuing his strong declaration that Jesus is God in the flesh, that he is divine. Jesus is pre-eminent! He is *before* all things and he “ranks” above all things. Paul makes this very clear in 1:16, saying, “whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.” Although this is probably too difficult to comprehend completely, it should, at the same time, provide a great sense of peace and freedom. This world we live in can be a troubling place. It is full of evil and pain and it is all too ready to heap mounds of fear, dread, and anxiety upon our heads. But knowing that Jesus is above it all allows for calm and a peace that “passes all understanding.”⁵⁴

Finally, Paul homes in on what this means for the body of Christ, the church. Greg Breazeale puts it succinctly, “Not only is Christ over creation, He is also over the new creation, the church. He is the head of the church (v.18). The universal church throughout the ages is ruled by Christ, as is each local congregation of believers who profess Him as Lord.”⁵⁵ The beauty of

51. Matt Slick, “The Trinity, the Hypostatic Union, and the Communicatio Idiomatum,” Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry, November 24, 2008, accessed November 3, 2018, <https://carm.org/trinity-hypostatic-union-and-communicatio-idiomatum>.

52. Hebrews 1:3.

53. Colossians 1:15.

54. Philippians 4:7.

this is that it leaves unmistakable guidelines for those who are his followers. There does not need to be confusion. Jesus is the head of the church and he is the one that governs and rules and directs us as the body. And furthermore, Jesus died for the church because of his love for it. His followers are to be led by those in authority at the local church level, and they are to love the church and its members as Jesus loved the church.

What are the implications for those in youth ministry? Are they to gloss over this fact (Paul certainly didn't). No. A strong and healthy youth ministry does exactly what Paul did in this text: it wraps the very essence of its existence around the fact that Jesus, and Jesus alone, is God, he is the ruler and authority over all creation and he is the leader and head of the local body, the church. This Christocentric approach to doing youth ministry should be our first and foremost responsibility.

Partnering with Parents

Deeper youth ministry is one where parents are loved, involved, and actively participating in the youth program. They are invited and warmly accepted into any aspect of the ministry. Because it is the students' parents who carry the primary responsibility for the spiritual development of their child, the doors should always be open to them and they should feel as if their presence is not only welcomed, but also desired. Gary Parrett and Steve Kang, in their book *Teaching the Faith, Forming the Faithful*, cite a timeless book written by the great Puritan pastor, Richard Baxter. Parrett and Kang note, "Baxter's classic work *The Reformed Pastor*, though often used in pastoral ministry classes because of its clarion call to pastoral integrity in life, is really an extended argument for pastoral engagement in catechizing each member of the

55. Greg Breazeale, "Sermon: The Incomparable Christ – Col. 1," LifeWay, January 1, 2014, accessed November 3, 2018, <http://www.lifeway.com/Article/sermon-incomparable-christ-colossians-1-image-firstborn>.

flock.”⁵⁶ The primary helpers that Baxter has in view are, in fact, the parents. Parrett and Kang add, “He argues that parents bear primary responsibility for catechizing their children. In this critical area, pastors take a secondary and supplementary role.”⁵⁷

Many parents decide on church attendance according to the spiritual needs of their children and/or teenagers. Is the children’s department strong and viable? Do they offer a reputable and prevailing youth ministry? In doing so, it is not uncommon for parents therefore to relinquish a large portion of their responsibility to nurture their children in the faith. Parrett and Kang address this with five key encouragements for parents and youth ministries,

1. Show them – by means of example
2. Exhort them – through the pulpit and elsewhere
3. Nurture them – in accordance with their own faith development
4. Equip them – through seminars, resources, study groups and more
5. Support them – by recognizing the weightiness of their calling and not overburdening them⁵⁸

Regardless of the popularity or attendance of any given youth program, it is the parents who have the power and ability to “make or break” the ministry. If a group of parents chooses to revolt and move against the ministry, they have the capability, in most cases, of shutting down the program. But, if the parents feel important, loved, and vital to the success of the ministry, then that ministry can almost certainly withstand any troublesome issue. Unfortunately, many youth ministers project a message that parents are either unwanted, or irrelevant. That is the exact opposite of what should be communicated.

56. Gary Parrett and Steve Kang, *Teaching the Faith, Forming the Faithful* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 158.

57. Parrett and Kang, *Teaching the Faith, Forming the Faithful*, 160

58. Parrett and Kang, *Teaching the Faith, Forming the Faithful*, 162-168.

Tim Elmore, in his book *Generation iY: Our Last Chance to Save Their Future*, writes, “I believe that healthy leadership from healthy parents and teachers produces healthy students who become healthy leaders themselves. I am haunted by the truth that James Baldwin once penned: ‘Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them.’”⁵⁹

Ephesians 4:11-16

This is the penultimate passage from the New Testament describing the role of the church and its members. There is so much here that applies to this project in growing a deeper youth ministry and deeper-minded young Christians. In this letter written to the church in Ephesus, Paul lays out sound doctrine and then begins the transition in chapter four to the practical. He doesn’t completely abandon the theological or doctrinal teaching, but he does shift to instructing his readers about how to live out his teachings.

Exegesis and Interpretation of the Text

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

—Ephesians 4:11-16

59. Tim Elmore, *Generation iY: Our Last Chance to Save Their Future* (Atlanta, GA: Poet Gardener, 2010), 108.

These first two verses, although easy to skim right through, really give a good idea of what Christ followers are to be doing in the local body. Paul tells us that it was Jesus himself who entrusts the believer with different gifts and abilities. And what is the aim of these gifts? To “equip” or prepare Christ followers for “works of service.”

This is really a great picture of the Christian life, and a great blueprint for youth ministry. As believers come to know and follow Jesus, he equips them with abilities and gifts so that they may serve and love others, and in so doing, become a unified body with others. As a result, we become more mature and, therefore, become more like Christ. When this happens, we are no longer little children who are unable to handle the challenges and difficulties that the world throws our way. And as mature, growing Christians, the church can be the church that God intends it to be: a living, growing body full of love for one another. In addition, through engagement and participation, each member becomes an important part of the whole church. A. Skevington Wood puts it this way, “Christ is at once the One into whom all Christians grow and out of whom (ex hou) the church consolidates itself in love. This process depends on the fact that the various parts of the body are interrelated.”⁶⁰

Youth ministers who are supported and teaming up with mature, Christian parents who eagerly engage in the youth program are extremely fortunate. This partnership comes with a double blessing: the child and his or her family are blessed and the youth ministry as a whole is blessed. Chap Clark adds,

Parents must commit to two vital strategies in leading and loving their midadolescent children: first, to understanding them and their world, and second, to providing them with safe and secure boundaries while still allowing them the necessary room to grow. The healthiest and most productive strategy is for parents to be so involved in the lives of their midadolescents that they can understand how complex, incongruent, and layered

60. A. Skevington Wood, “Ephesians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 11: Ephesians through Philemon*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1978), 59.

this phase of life is for their children. Parents who lovingly seek to understand that their son or daughter is in the midst of wildly changing psychosocial experiences and events will be well on the way to being the kind of anchor the child needs during this period.⁶¹

Parents who partner with the church's youth leaders, and who are lovingly engaged in the life of the child, will go a long, long way toward helping their teens become fully functioning disciples of Jesus.

More than Application

Deeper youth ministries have an intentional emphasis on “implication” as opposed to merely “application.” What does this mean? Application is absolutely important, but only after students understand the implication of the Christian life. In other words, deeper youth ministries focus on transformation more than, and before, they focus on information. Far too often youth ministries, and churches, focus on “practical applications” that are supposed to be incorporated into the lives of their students so they might live differently and therefore demonstrate to God their deeper level of commitment. The problem with this is that it doesn't work. The application has to come after the life change. “Implication” is that deeper understanding of the Christian faith, and a genuine love for Jesus which then leads us to application – the “applying” of Christian principles to our NEW life. Then, and only then, is true life-change even possible... and plausible. Mike Yaconelli, co-founder of Youth Specialties, puts it this way, “The greatest enemy of Christianity may be people who say they believe in Jesus but who are no longer astonished and amazed.”⁶²

61. Chap Clark, *Inside the World of Today's Teenager* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004, 2011), 100.

62. Yaconelli, *Dangerous Wonder*, 24.

A powerful example of an “implication story” is found in the Old Testament book of 2 Samuel where Nathan and David are having an impassioned conversation regarding David’s adultery. Throughout the course of the discussion, David’s anger and frustration grow to a peak level. At this point, David can finally see and sense the depth of his sin and the true nature of his actions. Nathan does not offer three practical steps for David to follow. Rather, Nathan exclaims, “You are the man!”⁶³ Again, Nathan does not tell David what he should do. David is left with his own thoughts and emotions. As a result, he repents, turns to the Lord, and rearranges his life based on what he has heard. This is “implication.”

In his book, *Preaching Re-Imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith*, Doug Pagitt writes,

Implication destabilizes. When a person is told she has cancer or she’s won the lottery or her house burned down, she instantly recognizes she’s in a new situation and a new story. While her initial reaction might be one of application (what will I do now?), she quickly moves into implication (how will this change me and the life I live?). Application is about how a piece of information fits into your life. Implication is not about fitting; it’s about redefining. It’s not value-added suggestion; it’s a call to see the story and join in it.⁶⁴

It is certainly vital that students understand and learn what the scriptures are all about. They should be able to quote verses, give a defense for what they believe, be able to articulate what different passages of the bible mean, and tell many of the beautiful stories contained therein. But it is a deeper, heartfelt understanding of scripture that changes lives. There is an old adage, first quoted by Dwight L. Moody, which still rings true: “The bible was not given for our

63. 2 Samuel 12:7a.

64. Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith* (El Cajon, CA: Zondervan, 2005), 102.

information but for our transformation.”⁶⁵ It was Paul who wrote in chapter 12 of his letter to the Roman people, “Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”⁶⁶ Paul’s encouragement was not to apply new principles to your life, but rather to allow your life to be transformed. *The Message* version of the bible uses the phrase, “You’ll be changed from the inside out.” Students have to learn to allow Jesus to live deep in their lives and then, and only then, can “application principles” begin to make meaningful sense to them.

Revelation 2:4

Having a strong emphasis on application is to be accepted and desired and is even, in part, the title of this dissertation. But there is a fundamental element missing when the primary focus is first and foremost—and often only—on this “practical application.” How is a Christian to “apply,” authentically and genuinely (and successfully), Christian and biblical teaching without first having their hearts warmed and turned to Christ? Not only is this backward thinking, it may also set new Christians (and immature Christians) up for failure. The emphasis is on “trying harder” to accomplish something that will please God (or, trying to overcome something that is currently displeasing God) without first addressing the heart issue. A person can be an average husband without loving his wife – doing the dishes, taking out the garbage, sorting laundry, etc. But not until his wife truly does enamor his heart will he become a truly great husband. All of the “practical stuff” will be worthless as she sees right through that façade. This is true in our Christian lives as well. John R. W. Stott, referring to Revelation 2:4, states that

65. Jim and Janene Ayer, *Your Daily Journey to Transformation* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing, 2013), 113.

66. Romans 12:2a.

the text is “a reference to their inner devotion to Christ that characterized their earlier commitment, like the love of a newly wedded bride for her husband.”⁶⁷ Our first task in developing deeply devoted Christ-following disciples is to do all that we can to make sure that young hearts are being aligned with Christ’s. Young people involved in deeper youth ministries are encouraged to fall in love with Jesus, and then to continue to grow deeper in love with him.

Exegesis and Interpretation of the Text

Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first.
—Revelation 2:4

This letter, written “to the angel of the church in Ephesus,” contains God’s message to the Ephesian church, which was surrounded by a corrupt and unethical culture.⁶⁸ They were commended for their perseverance and for their many good works, but they were chastised for losing their love for Jesus. Once, Paul was genuinely thrilled with his Christian brothers and sisters there, saying, “I have never stopped giving thanks for you.”⁶⁹ But now they had grown cold and perhaps fatigued as Christians. S. Michael Houdmann, CEO and President of Got Questions Ministries, adds, “The first love which characterized the Ephesians was the zeal and ardor with which they embraced their salvation as they realized they loved Christ because He first loved them (1 John 4:19) and that it was, in fact, His love for them that had made them ‘alive together with Christ.’”⁷⁰

67. John R.W. Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1958), 27.

68. Revelation 2:1.

69. Ephesians 1:16.

70. “What Does It Mean to Have Left Your First Love (Revelation 2:4)?” Got Questions Ministries, accessed November 3, 2018, <http://www.gotquestions.org/left-first-love.html>.

Because of the paganism and the surrounding non-Christian culture, the church at Ephesus had a difficult task ahead. On top of that, they had begun to lose their zeal and passion for Jesus and were, perhaps, in jeopardy of turning away from Christ altogether. The Ephesians were warned to turn back and renew their devotion and love for the Messiah.

The church, and our youth ministries, face the same dilemma today. We must continually put before our students the necessity of keeping our hearts soft and warm for Jesus. The world is a hostile place and wants nothing more than to create a divide between young people and Christ. Youth ministries are worthless if they're not doing everything they can to help kids fall deeper in love with Jesus.

Leading Up

Deeper youth ministry understands that, just as the parents are important to the discipleship process, so too is the senior pastor. Far too often the relationship between the youth minister and the senior pastor is strained and that hinders the entire process. The senior pastor and youth minister must be of "one accord" and moving in the same direction. Paul, in his letter to the people of Philippi, writes, "Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind."⁷¹ Imagine a youth ministry, or any ministry, where the senior pastor and youth pastor have this type of relationship and bond. That ministry would be flourishing and the youth minister would have the peace and confidence to be bold for Christ.

71. Philippians 2:1-2.

Without the genuine support of the senior pastor, the hope of a deep student discipleship ministry almost completely vanishes.

Unfortunately, most youth ministers think it is the senior pastor's role to develop and build the relationship with the youth minister. But senior pastors are busy, so it is incumbent upon the youth minister to "lead up" and be proactive in making sure that the relationship is established and built for continued growth. John Maxwell defines "leading up" as, "influencing the people above you."⁷² When this happens in a healthy way, youth ministers can take their students in a deeper direction.

Luke 22:24-30

As followers of Jesus, Christians are to be different. Different in all aspects of their lives. In a church that is striving for depth in all areas of their ministries, the leadership paradigm is different as well. A good leader is one who is out front leading, while at the same time, allowing him or herself to be led. In other words, a good leader is a good follower. This principally applies to the relationship between Senior Pastor and Youth Pastor. When this occurs and is evident, deeper youth ministry is possible. In addition, this benefits the entire ministry from the youth leader(s) all the way to the students who are involved. When a Senior Pastor is cognizant of this, and recognizes his or her role in this type of healthy leadership, even the students can become enamored with all that is happening. This is one-way Christianity becomes contagious and nurtures a deeper, healthier, richer youth ministry.

72. John Maxwell, "Facing the Challenge of Leading Up," The John Maxwell Company, June 7, 2016, accessed November 3, 2018, <http://www.johnmaxwell.com/blog/facing-the-challenge-of-leading-up>.

David Olhine addresses this powerfully in his book *Youth Ministry: What's Gone Wrong and How to Get It Right*, when he writes, "If you are a senior leader in the church, you are valued. Students like you and respect who you are and what you do. You are a huge reason youth ministry is happening (or not happening). The message senior pastors need to hear is this: 'You have incredible influence in the lives of teenagers, and they look to you for spiritual leadership.' What an encouragement."⁷³

Senior pastors (and all of those in a leadership and/or supervisory position) need not only to understand this, but also be in an environment where this is happening. This happens when the youth minister has the courage to make it happen with his or her supervisor, and when the supervisor has the wisdom to allow it to happen. Paul Fleischmann, in his book *Better Together: Discovering the Dynamic Results of Cooperation*, validates this when he writes, "Transparency and openness with God and each other create an environment where God can accomplish His will. Sure, God can do whatever He wants whenever He wants, but He usually chooses to work through people."⁷⁴

Exegesis and Interpretation of the Text

A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. You are those who have stood by me in my trials. And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

—Luke 22:24-30

73. David Olshine, *Youth Ministry: What's Gone Wrong and How to Get It Back* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2013), 25.

74. Paul Fleischmann, *Better Together: Discovering the Dynamic Results of Cooperation* (Oviedo, FL: HigherLife Publishing, 2014), 49.

Even in Jesus' day, leadership was a challenge. This story in Luke 22 is chiefly about precedence and position (very similar to today) and applicable to Christian leadership. The disciples were eager to learn of their future position in life and about their level of greatness. But Jesus retorts with two powerful points in regard to greatness. First, Christ followers are not to seek the adoration and admiration that was bestowed upon older persons at that time. But rather Christians are to be content with the lower status of a young person. Second, like a person at a dinner table, Jesus teaches that Christians are not to strive to be the one who is served, but to serve as Christ came to do.

It is very poignant how Jesus relates these two illustrations to his own trials, the Kingdom of God, and servant leadership. In essence, Jesus instructs his disciples not to strive for prominence, but to be servants and lead up from that lower position. This was precisely what Jesus was doing and continued to do. It is easy to recall and see the parallel here with Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet in John 13:12-17. Jesus is obviously modeling this type of leadership while, at the same time, teaching the disciples (and those who choose to follow him) a new way of leading.

This is to continue in the church today. It is incumbent upon church staff to lead humbly and as servants while strongly allowing and pursuing leadership from their supervisors. And when supervisors allow the staff to lead up, great things happen for the church and the Kingdom. This is a biblical understanding of church leadership. In his book, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, Mark Dever writes, "We'll also be helped as Christians by a biblical understanding of leadership. As God brings people into our lives whom he has called to be spiritual leaders, we gain practical role models and godly vision."⁷⁵

75. Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 222.

No More “Big Church”

Deeper youth ministry accentuates Sunday morning as a time for students to thrive. One of the most damaging things that has been done in the church is to make Sunday morning seemingly irrelevant and uninteresting to the average teenager. This has to change! Students need to be participating actively in a relevant way on Sunday mornings. They need to see that church is for them as well as every other member of the body. Students need to be a functioning, actively participating part of nearly every aspect of the Sunday morning program. They can serve as part of the worship band, greeters and ushers, even up-front speaking parts if and when ready. Mike King, in his book *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry: Guiding Students into Spiritual Formation*, writes, “Another huge problem within evangelical ecclesiological practice is the propensity to segregate youth ministry from the rest of the church. Even though many churches pledge during infant dedication or baptisms to help raise a child as a community of believers, too often the next time the child is before the congregation is to honor them for graduating from high school.”⁷⁶

The Sunday-morning church program should struggle to exist if no students are involved. Ask almost any young person to describe Sunday morning “church” in one word, and most likely that word will be “boring!” In his book, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, Dan Kimball writes, “No longer must we apologize for looking or acting ‘spiritual’ in church. Teenagers crave inclusion in something bigger than themselves—something mystical and transcendent.”⁷⁷

76. Mike King, *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry: Guiding Students into Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 33.

77. Dan Kimball, *Postmodern Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 92.

One of the mistakes youth ministers and youth ministry makes is essentially to remove adults from the life of the teen, particularly on Sunday mornings. Often the youth who are in attendance in a church building are seated by themselves away from parents and other adults. They are there, but not engaged. Chap Clark, in his book *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenager*, adds this:

The bible calls us to live as a community, a body, and a family. We are not brought into an intimate relationship with God through Christ for our sakes but rather for the sake of God's purposes for those he loves. The message of reconciliation with God is an invitation to join with others who recognize their individual and collective need to love God and to live in love with one another. Thus, the goal of youth ministry should be to make disciples of Jesus Christ who are authentically walking with God within the context of intimate Christian community. This definition implies that the following three convictions are at the core of youth ministry: We are to invest in the making of followers of Jesus Christ; this is a long-term journey of faith; and authentic trust in God is fostered as youth people and adults recognize that a community is one in which all members need and belong to one another.⁷⁸

On Sunday mornings both the adults in attendance and the students must recognize that they are not only there together, but need each other to thrive as disciples of Jesus. There is to be a genuine community of love and concern and care. When students recognize this and genuinely live into it, their lives will be forever changed by it. Sunday mornings will no longer be “boring,” but rather fruitful and vital.

Exegesis and Interpretation of the Text

Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. He

188. 78. Chap Clark, *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenager* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004),

is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.

—Colossians 1:24-29

Paul, in his letter to the church of Colossae, addresses the importance of those in the church to become mature followers of Jesus. He saw his role in this as a minister and this not only as a privilege and an honor, but also as a sacred trust. His purpose was “to present the word of God in all its fullness.”⁷⁹ This might be interpreted as referring to an extension of the gospel to a geographical locale.⁸⁰ Curtis Vaughan, contributor to *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, understands this in another way. He writes, “Paul probably means that his special ministry was to make clear the true nature of the gospel as a divine provision intended for all people.”⁸¹

Does this include young people? A deeper look at Paul’s writings here in Colossians seems to strongly suggest that this is for all followers. Vaughan continues by adding,

The aim of Paul’s proclaiming, admonishing, and teaching was to “present everyone perfect in Christ.” “Present” (*paristemi*) refers to the bringing into God’s presence at the return of Christ (1Thessalonians 2:19-20, 5:23). Only then will God’s work in the believer be complete. “Perfect” suggests attainment of the proper end of one’s existence. Other versions use such terms as “complete” (NAB), “full grown” (Montgomery), “mature” (RSV). The reference is to maturity in faith and character (Ephesians 4:13), and it is a prospect held out for “everyone.” Such maturity is possible “in Christ,” that is, by virtue of the believer’s union with Christ.⁸²

79. Colossians 1:25.

80. i.e. Romans 15:19.

81. Curtis Vaughan, “Colossians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 11: Ephesians through Philemon*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1978), 191.

82. Vaughan, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 194

Paul's admonition was for all people, including young people, to be a functioning and engaged part of the body and to grow into maturity. The aim of a deeper youth ministry will be, in part, to make sure that happens.

Deeper, Theologically Sound, Fun

Deeper youth ministry is fun! It is punctuated with exciting, new, changing, and always advancing ideas. There are crazy times, wild abandonment, retreats, camping experiences, impromptu fun, wonder, awe, and an adventurous child-like anticipation. At the same time, everything, especially the teaching, is to be based on sound, biblical doctrine. Students learn to "fall in love with the bible" and begin the exciting journey of understanding it. The fun will be a way to draw kids in, keep them interested, and allow them to continue along the journey.

Mike Yaconelli, author of *Dangerous Wonder: The Adventure of Childlike Faith*, speaks to this:

I believe roller coasters are a more accurate model of the Christian life. You say yes to Jesus, and suddenly you are strapped in and you think, *I'm going to die!* Then you begin the long climb of growth – Sunday school, baptism, church membership – and you think, *hey, no problem. I can follow Jesus anywhere*, and then – *ZOOOOOOM* – you crash into the twists and turns of life, jerking left then right, up then down, and fifty, sixty years go by and – *WHAM* – you're dead. I have used the roller coaster as my model for many years now, and I often say to people, "If I were to have a heart attack right at this moment, I hope I would have just enough air in my lungs and just enough strength in me to utter one last sentence as I fell to the floor: 'What a ride!' My life has been up and down, careening left then right, full of mistakes and bad decisions, and if I died right now, even though I would love to live longer, I could say from the depths of my soul, 'What a ride!'"⁸³

A deeper student ministry looks like that, at least to some degree. It's an adventure with crazy ups and downs and twists and turns that help to propel young people forward as Christ

83. Yaconelli, *Dangerous Wonder*, 106.

followers. It is a ministry that “keeps them on their toes” and “always keeps them guessing.” Students who graduate from a youth ministry like this are bound to say, when looking back over their youth ministry years, “what a ride!”

This is not to say, however, that there is not a serious, deeply contemplative, and reflective/thoughtful aspect to youth ministry. There is. Youth ministry is not to be just fun and games. Along with a serious component, a deeper youth ministry will have an enjoyable and fun aspect that will create enthusiasm, passion, and an eagerness to be engaged. David Olshine addresses this in regard to studying God’s Word: “Bible devotions do not have to be drab or boring. They can be fun if you make them fun. I find there are many odd and weird stories in the bible that kids actually want to discuss.”⁸⁴

2 Timothy 1:6

In the quest for extreme fun and for bigger and better, youth programs often lose perspective on what’s really important. And what is most important in youth ministry is the individual lives of the young people involved in the program. This passage reminds leaders not only to start something with our young people, but to make sure it comes to completion. If young disciples are taught that they are gifted to do great things with and for God, it will change their lives. Instead, they are bombarded daily with the message that they are to reach worldly goals that mostly just serve themselves. Some of these goals are okay, but ultimately, knowing what God wants of his followers and then consequently growing and developing that is what gives life purpose and meaning.

84. Olshine, *Youth Ministry*, 122.

Exegesis and Interpretation of the Text

For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands.

—2 Timothy 1:6

Paul clearly loved Timothy and, throughout many parts of his New Testament writings, Paul offers up to Timothy words of encouragement and instruction. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul offers this counsel to his friend: “Do not neglect your gift.”⁸⁵ Although in a mentoring relationship, Paul is beginning to prepare Timothy for ministry partnership. He is challenging Timothy to grow, and explore all that God has given him. The Greek *charisma* occurs “sixteen times in Paul’s Epistles and only once elsewhere in the NT.”⁸⁶ It comes from the root *charis*, ‘grace,’ and so means ‘a gift of grace, a free gift.’⁸⁷ What Paul has done is to prepare Timothy for ministry. He has built him up and educated him and now he is beginning the process of sending him out and encouraging him to use this special gift of grace that God has given him. But in Timothy’s case, it is more than the grace that is imparted to all Christians. In essence, Paul is saying to Timothy that he is special and that God has chosen him to be a spokesperson for him.

Timothy is unique. He came with a deep, spiritual background and a true love for the Savior. Paul is “laying on hands”—perhaps a type of ordination service for Timothy—and commissioning him to go out and spread the good news. And just as a small fire grows by

85. 1 Timothy 4:14.

86. 1 Peter 4:10.

87. Ralph Earle, “1 & 2 Timothy,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 11: Ephesians through Philemon*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), 396.

fanning it, Paul is encouraging Timothy now to go out and continue the ministry, and to preach, teach, and spread the Gospel enthusiastically as he is now so equipped to do.

Are youth ministries not called to do the same thing in their churches and in their youth programs? What Paul has done with his young friend Timothy is exactly what youth programs are to be doing with their young students. They are to be brought in, warmly welcomed, befriended, and taught. But there is a point, generally sooner than later, whereby ministers and volunteer leaders are to begin to “fan their growing flames” and exhort them to do new and great things for the Kingdom. Many students never even consider that, perhaps, God is calling them to do more and/or calling them into full-time ministry. And not only that, but also to be living in a Christ like manner and to be workers of integrity in whatever vocation God calls them. It is the joyful duty of the youth ministry team, and a great privilege, to be the voice that communicates this to them. Deeper youth ministry encourages wildfires to grow among its youth.

The Youth Have Left the Building

Deeper youth ministry “leaves the building.” One of the best ways to bring life-change to a young person is to have a “missional mindset” and to get them outside of the walls of the church building and involved in service and missions. Dan Kimball discusses what it means to be “missional” in his book, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church: Insights From Emerging Generations*:

Throughout this book, you will see the term *missional*. To be missional is more than just to evangelize. Here are some ways of thinking of this term as the underlying philosophy of this book:

- Being missional means that the church sees itself as *being* missionaries, rather than having a missions department, and that we see ourselves as missionaries right where we live.

- Being missional means that we see ourselves as representatives of Jesus “sent” into our communities, and that the church aligns everything it does with the *missio dei* (mission of God).
- Being missional means we see the church not as a place we go only on Sunday, but as something we are throughout the week.
- Being missional means that we understand we don’t “bring Jesus” to people but that we realize Jesus is active in culture and we join him in what he is doing.
- Being missional means we are very much in the world and engaged in culture but are not conforming to the world.
- Being missional means we serve our communities, and that we build relationships with the people in them, rather than seeing them as evangelistic targets.
- Being missional means being all the more dependent on Jesus and the Spirit through prayer, the Scriptures, and each other in community.⁸⁸

So many youth programs focus on outreach and entertainment (which is important), but youth programs that want to dig deeper are not only “missional,” but also incorporate service and mission opportunities for their students. Again, David Olshine addresses this aspect of our youth ministries: “Youth ministry is not about creating a youth group but instead creating a movement. Groups that are only interested in focusing inwardly will die a slow death. God’s intent has always been about growth and change. True discipleship goes from the inner world to the outer world. True disciples of Jesus care about others.”⁸⁹ This missional, service and missions mindset challenges and stretches kids mentally, physically, relationally, and spiritually. It is a powerful component to a deep ministry. Certainly, we are to gather as the body of believers. But we are also to go beyond the walls of the church and be a beacon of light into the community, culture, and world.

88. Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 20.

89. Olshine, *Youth Ministry*, 122.

Matthew 28:16-20

After his resurrection, Jesus met with his disciples. Most of them were in awe of what they were witnessing and worshipped him. But some were probably confused and curious as to what was really happening. In addition, there was probably a bit of fear as to what was going to happen next. Youth ministers and youth ministries can, at times, become very content with staying and merely cruising along. Things are going well and they are comfortable. This is fine for a season (perhaps a short season), but deeper youth ministries are never content with comfortability or cruising.

Exegesis and Interpretation of the Text

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

—Matthew 28:16-20

One of the key words here is the word “go.” Jesus said that his followers were to “go” into the world and make disciples, not just sit and stay where they were. A deeper youth ministry is going to be fun and enjoyable, but it also must challenge students to get up, go out, and be with those who are outside the walls of the church building. A deeper youth ministry has a missional, mission, and service intentionality.

It is no accident that the Gospel of Matthew concludes with this proclamation. Christ followers are not only to be baptized, but are also to be taught. This teaching is based on everything Jesus commands us to do. The Gospel, therefore, ends with the high expectation that His followers will continue to teach others and will continue to be missional.

Teenage Spiritual Heroes

Deeper youth ministries will “push the ministry down” and allow students to “step up.” This phrase, “pushing the ministry down,” essentially means that those who are in a position of leadership will allow students to take on the many, diverse roles of ministry, instead of doing most of the work themselves. Allowing them to “step up” and take on the role of a leader in ministry creates a deeper passion within them to do what Christ has called us all to do. Deeper youth ministry encourages and even drives young people to be “spiritual heroes” among their peers. They are to lead the way, set the example and show their friends what it means to live the overcoming Christian life. Dallas Willard writes, “The world can no longer be left to mere diplomats, politicians, and business leaders. They have done the best they could, no doubt. But this is an age for spiritual heroes—a time for men and women to be heroic in their faith and in spiritual character and power. The greatest danger to the Christian church today is that of pitching its message *too low*.”⁹⁰

Young people may sometimes appear to be apathetic when it comes to the church and/or spiritual practices. But often a deeper look will reveal something quite different. If and when given the opportunity, and the belief in them, youth become enthused and anticipatory of what they can accomplish and achieve. Mike King adds,

If we’re willing to abandon ourselves to the radical cause of Christ, youth will join us. They are desperate for real life, something worth laying down their lives for. Teenagers (and adults for that matter) continue to flock to movie theaters, where they get a glimpse of what it might be like to live heroically. We’re attracted to bigger-than-us life and

90. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1999), 140.

adventure. Failing to connect the call of God to this inherent desire in human beings, we tinker with our generic invitations to be “good for God.”⁹¹

Deeper youth ministries are wise when they believe in young people, train them to be radical ministers themselves, and turn them loose to do real, powerful ministry, especially to their peers.

Ephesians 5:8-11

One of the phenomena that the writer of this thesis-project has observed over the years in youth ministry, in his own groups and in other church youth groups, is that most teenagers, although admittedly Christian, find it difficult at best and very challenging at the least to live their lives as distinguished and separate from the rest of the world. They are far too often painfully quiet and reluctantly bashful when it comes to “standing out from the crowd.” They may have had a stirring moment at camp one night, and could probably pass their basic Confirmation Class quiz, but do they really live lives that are uniquely Christian and obviously distinct from their peer group? The observation of this writer, again, has been no. This type of “teenager discipleship living” is unique and excruciatingly rare. Matthew tells us to “let your light shine before others.”⁹² A deeply developed Christ follower will passionately and eagerly do this. It certainly is part of the maturation process, but one that a deeper youth ministry encourages and teaches. Why is it not the norm for students to live this way and even cause them to wonder why anyone would choose to live otherwise? In other words, why is it so hard for them? In his book, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, Mark Dever explains it this way:

Good influences in a covenanted community of believers can be tools in God’s hand for growing his people. As God’s people are built up and grow together in holiness and self-

56. 91. Mike King, *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006),

92. Matthew 5:16.

giving love, they should improve in their ability to administer discipline and to encourage discipleship. The church has an obligation to be a means of God's growing people in grace.⁹³

A deeper youth ministry can be a place where they can wrestle with their doubts without fear of rejection or judgment and so lead them into a transformational experience with Jesus. In doing so, students will begin to overcome the obstacles that keep them from becoming bold light-bearers for Christ.

Exegesis and Interpretation of the Text

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.

—Ephesians 5:8-11

In his book, *Renovation of the Heart*, Dallas Willard targets six areas of the Christian's life that should be transformed in such a way as to shine like a light in this darkened world. He draws an interesting parallel between parents and their children and Ephesians 5:8. Just as parents pass down their genes and characteristics to their children (their "nature"), so, too, does this happen to us with light. It's as if "Light" is our parent and we, as "children of light," are to take on this nature and let it become a part of who we are. In doing so, we would begin to see it manifested in all aspects of our life. These six areas referred to by Willard include the following:

1. Our thought life
2. Our feelings
3. Our will
4. Our bodies
5. Our social relations
6. Our soul⁹⁴

93. Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 224.

94. Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 218-20.

Perhaps the first and primary way would be in our thought life. This change is indeed an inner-life change and this inner-life change should grow primarily from our minds. Luke wrote of this in an ingenious way when he penned the following: “A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.”⁹⁵ What is it that students are allowing to get deep down inside their hearts and begin to be stored up in their minds? If it’s evil, then that is what will come out. If it’s good, then good will come out. Willard adds that we are to be “God-intoxicated” because all we do is think about him and all that he has done to bring us into the light through Jesus Christ.⁹⁶

A student’s emotional life would then be the recipient of this change. In essence, they would love more. They would love life, the things of life, and most importantly, they would love people. Their lives would spill over with gratitude and thankfulness. Willard adds, “Because of what they have learned about God, they are confident and hopeful and do not indulge thoughts of rejection, failure, and hopelessness, because they *know better*.”⁹⁷ How amazing is that, and do youth leaders ever need to allow this kind of thinking to permeate their way of thinking in the church and youth ministries today! A person’s very nature is being transformed and the transformation does not just stay in their minds, it manifests itself in all areas of their being. As was already alluded to, this was the very thing that drew the writer of this thesis to his youth pastor, and shortly thereafter, to Christ himself.

95. Luke 6:45.

96. Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 218.

97. Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 219.

Willard then addresses the human will, heart and/or spirit. With a deeper look into the person, it becomes evident that love and a gentler heart truly guide them. These Christ followers are indeed more attuned to God and are, therefore, kinder, sweeter, friendlier, more considerate, and more loving. Willard then adds this,

Now, these people are not perfect and do not live in a perfect world – yet. But they are remarkably different. The difference is not one of a pose they strike, either from time to time or constantly, or of things they do or don't do – though their behavior too is very different and distinctive. Where the children of light differ is primarily and most importantly on the “inside” of their life. It lies in what they are in their depths.⁹⁸

Because a deeper Christian's life has begun to be transformed, particularly as it pertains to their minds, wills, and emotions, it is only natural that their bodies join in on the parade. It is true that the body does what the mind says to do, and their bodies are in alignment with their already different thinking. They are “prepared” to do good things and not to be as tempted to do things that they should not. Their attitudes have changed and their bodies fall into place. Their facial expressions, the gentleness of their physical selves, and the way they carry themselves all point to a change in who they are. These are the kids in youth programs who become leaders in their ministries and who are more inclined to serve in their ministries with younger students. They are able to interact with them without there being any chance of physical danger or harm. It is a joy to have them around because they are warm and friendly and loving, emotionally and physically.

As a result of the above, a believer's social relations are much deeper and much better. They are able to have richer friendships because they are able and willing to dig deeper with others. The elements of shame and hidden-ness are not there and the joy of openness triumphs. Small group discussions are deeper and sought after. There is no bullying and intimidation. True

98. Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 218.

friendships are developed and the *koinonia* that the Christian church needs is discovered. This is a beautiful thing when it happens with young people. Often in their lives, they really have no one to turn to or to confide in. Parents are oftentimes not home, and when they are, they're too busy. Technology and computer games have taken the place of true relationships and kids are being emotionally damaged as a result. In addition to that, kids seem to have lost the ability to develop real, deep friendships. Bullying is a real threat at school and kids are generally very defensive. Being able to get real with friends and grow deeper relationships with peers and adults is, in the real sense of the word, a lifesaver!⁹⁹ This most likely will be borne out more and more in the project research at the end of this thesis.

As a deep Christian continues to let their light shine, it becomes apparent that it is a natural outpouring of the soul. What used to be done by exerting oneself is now done effortlessly. Willard says, "These are features of a life that well up out of a soul that is at home in God."¹⁰⁰

Numbers 13:26-30

It was noted earlier that youth ministers need to "push the ministry down" and allow young people to step up into leadership roles. Of course, there are several reasons why this is not done, and why it is not done well when it is done. But there is one reason that is most prevalent

99. Chap Clark, *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 26. Clark succinctly addresses this issue: "On the surface, the adolescent world appears to be relatively stable and healthy. Yet beneath the calm waters presented by positive empirical data there is turmoil that is difficult, painful, lonely, and even harmful to our young. Even among those who argue that adolescents are basically fine, virtually no one would question the need young people, and especially adolescents, have for adults who are available, who care, and who come to them without a hidden or self-centered agenda. The fact is that adolescents need adults to become adults, and when adults are not present and involved in their lives, they are forced to figure out how to survive life on their own."

100. Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 220.

and it applies to both the youth leader and to the students. The primary reason that youth pastors and their students are not able to share the ministry (and thereby empower young people) is due to a lack of courage. Both youth ministers and their kids are afraid. They're afraid that people will question them, criticize them, or, the unthinkable, stop liking them. David Olshine adds, "In the American church, fear often rules. Senior leadership cannot let fear dominate. Things stall or are thrown into motion in direct proportion to the involvement of senior leadership."¹⁰¹

Churches and youth programs cannot operate out of fear or a lack of courage. There is something about being human that wants to be strong and bold, and it is admired when it is seen in others. Youth pastors, their student leaders and even the senior pastor of the church need to lead with courage and a willingness to take appropriate risks. The following text is a brilliant example of how that should look.

Exegesis and Interpretation of the Text

They came back to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the Desert of Paran. There they reported to them and to the whole assembly and showed them the fruit of the land. They gave Moses this account: "We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there. The Amalekites live in the Negev; the Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live near the sea and along the Jordan." Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, "We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it."

—Numbers 13:26-30

This is one of the greatest stories of courage in the entire bible. Here is a picture of the great dichotomy that faces most people who aim to be courageous. On the one hand, the spies in this story bring back a report that is remarkable and probably had Moses thinking that there was

101. Olshine, *Youth Ministry*, 20.

no other option but to take the land. A land that “does flow with milk and honey” is a picturesque way of saying that what was before them had abundance and richness. Surely, it was the land that God was leading them to as promised in Exodus 3:8 where it is written, “So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites.” Walter Kaiser, Jr. explains that the Hebrew (הַצִּילֹה) which, as shown above, is translated “to rescue them” but, as used here, comes from the collective singular meaning “to rescue him.” He adds, “It does explain why Israel faced little difficulty understanding how one individual (e.g., ‘seed’ or ‘servant’) could embody the whole group and that the God of their fathers was that man of promise who ultimately pointed to the Messiah but who also embodied all believers of all ages in that same collective singular.”¹⁰²

Quickly after giving such a glowing report of the land and its bounty, the spies then gave the second half of their report regarding the people of the land and their cities. In the NIV, the term “beṣurôt” (fortified) refers to cities (or almost anything) that is impenetrable and completely inaccessible. Their favorable report had suddenly become disastrous. Later in the report the spies add, “The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size.”¹⁰³

So how is it that Caleb and Joshua were able to step up with confidence and courage? These were two men who deeply believed that God was offering this land to his people and they were not about to give in to cowardliness. In human terms, they knew and could see that the odds were against them. But they also knew that their God was a powerful God who had not let them

102. Walter C. Kaiser Jr., “Exodus,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 2: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 317.

103. Numbers 13:32.

down in the past. And it was out of this confidence that they were able to proclaim to the people that “we can certainly do it.”

It has been the experience of this author that many youth programs lack this type of courage. They are happy to cruise along and do the things that are asked of them (generally, not too difficult) or do the normal things that most groups are doing. It is rare indeed to find a youth ministry that is courageous enough to do the things that require confidence in God and boldness in planning. This story here gives ample evidence that to be a ministry that seeks to follow and please God it must be willing to take the difficult steps, knowing full well that it may fail. But even in failure, if their confidence and courage is in the Lord, he will do great and mighty things with it and with us all.

This also applies to the person of the youth minister. It is discouraging to witness the timidity with which so many youth ministries are led. They all need attitudes like Caleb and Joshua and look down the youth ministry road and proclaim with courage, “We can certainly do it!”

“Reason-able”

Deeper youth ministry, within the church’s overall ministry, is to be evaluated and then executed for a reason. Andy Stanley and Stuart Hall, in their book on vital youth ministry, write,

It is not that programming is bad. In fact, it is the primary method to accomplish the monumental task of growing students spiritually. Sunday school is not the enemy, unless it has become a god unto itself. Where we seem to be failing is in creating the environments that best facilitate life change. To create the best environment possible, we have to define what we are trying to accomplish.”¹⁰⁴

104. Andy Stanley and Stuart Hall, *The Seven Checkpoints: Seven Principles Every Teenager Needs to Know* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2011), 221.

That purpose should be to drive the quest for deeper youth ministry, regardless of what it is. In doing so, everything that is done in the name of your youth ministry should be explainable. Every programming element should be evaluated and prayed about before it ever becomes a reality. And in doing this, it may be that some programs, even ones that are old and “dear to one’s heart,” will have to die. At some point, even the very best, brightest, and greatest ideas eventually become old and obsolete.

Wayne Rice, in his book *Reinventing Youth Ministry (Again): From Bells and Whistles to Flesh and Blood*, addresses this:

Most youth workers are very pragmatic, very bottom line oriented. If they buy a youth ministry book containing both a philosophy of ministry and a collection of ideas at the back of the book, nine out of ten will skip over the first part of the book and go straight for the ideas. (By the way, there are no ideas at the back of this book so don't bother looking.) The danger in doing so is that we lose sight of the intention behind the ideas, the purpose behind the programs. There's nothing wrong with programs of any kind so long as there is a good reason for doing them. It's easy however to fall into the trap of doing certain programs just because they've been done before or they've been done successfully somewhere else.¹⁰⁵

Youth ministry, like all ministries, is to be ever evolving and changing. Addressing the latest needs, desires, cultural influences, and teenage nuances with integrity and relevance is a never-ending opportunity for youth pastors. A deeper youth ministry does not aim just “to keep kids busy,” but rather to lead them to a deeper relationship with Jesus. Rice continues by saying, “There are some adults (and many parents in particular) who believe that the purpose of a youth ministry is to simply keep kids busy and well behaved.”¹⁰⁶

105. Wayne Rice, *Reinventing Youth Ministry (Again): From Bells and Whistles to Flesh and Blood* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 100.

106. Rice, *Reinventing Youth Ministry (Again)*, 105.

Ephesians 5:15-20

Churches and their ministries are busy. In 2017, Suntime United Methodist Church held or hosted approximately 6,000 meetings. Most of these meetings were helpful and necessary for those in attendance. But 6,000 meetings can become overwhelming. The same can be true of a youth ministry of any size. Youth Pastors and their youth programs can easily get caught up in the busyness of doing more and more and more. Although this can be fun and can certainly help to build attendance, it is always good to evaluate the necessity of everything that is done.

Paul, in his letter to the people of Ephesus, clearly saw the dangers of living a life that is reckless and not thought through. It can be dangerous in our youth programs as well.

Exegesis and Interpretation of the Text

Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

—Ephesians 5:15-20

Paul exhorts Christ followers to pay the utmost attention to their personal behavior and he underlines the vital importance of leading an exemplary life. This edict is true for youth ministries as well. Youth pastors are to pay deep attention to all that is done in their youth ministries, eliminating the mundane and the unnecessary. More importantly, all that is done is to be done with purpose and resolve in mind. Paul adds that we are to be “making the most of every opportunity.” A. Skevington Wood, in his commentary on the book of Ephesians, adds, “This is not to be treated allegorically, as if time were being snatched from the devil or from evil men. What is meant is simply to make the best possible use of all circumstances like prudent

merchants. *Kairos* (“opportunity,” NIV) is the right moment, which Paul urges his readers to grasp lest it be wasted.”¹⁰⁷

“Making the most of every possible opportunity,” although a lofty expectation, is still a reasonable ambition for youth ministers. When this is adhered to, the program begins to make sense and operate in a more precise and meaningful way. A smoothly running operation leads the way to life change and to deeper youth ministry.

107. Wood, “Ephesians,” 71.

CHAPTER THREE

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

There were several books that were formative for the author not only as a youth pastor, but as a Christian as well. They contributed greatly to this thesis-project. The goal to narrow this list down to six or eight books was actually rather daunting. This is not a new subject nor is it an unimportant one. In some very real ways this project is a microcosm of what is happening in the Church at large. The quest to develop a deeper youth ministry is germane to the entire Christian Church. Dietrich Bonhoeffer addressed this many years ago when he wrote, “Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession ... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”¹

Each of these books will be offered to help delve further into the topic of the non-negotiable elements of a deeper youth ministry. How they think, how they compare with one another, and why this is important will be illustrated and explained. It will be shown that a great deal of what they had to say applies to the research done for this project.

***Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* by Kenda Creasy Dean**

Almost Christian is based on the findings of the largest and most ambitious study of American teenagers and religion to date entitled the *National Study of Youth & Religion*

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1937), 43.

(NSYR).² The NSYR involved extensive interviews with more than 3,300 American teenagers between the ages of thirteen and seventeen, including 267 face-to-face interviews.³

One of the preliminary and alarming statistics that sprung from the pages of this study was the finding that only 8% of American youth have a “devoted faith.” A devoted faith, as defined by Dean and this study, includes:

1. Attends religious services weekly or more.
2. Faith is very or extremely important in everyday life.
3. Feels very or extremely close to God.
4. Currently involved in a religious youth group.
5. Prays a few times a week or more.
6. Reads scripture once or twice a week or more.⁴

This is a shocking number. To find that only 8% of today’s emerging teenage generation have what may be considered a “devoted faith” is disturbing. The question must be asked, “What is not working with today’s churches and today’s youth ministries?” The essence of this thesis-project is to develop a substantial answer to that question.

Further analysis of the book and the findings by the NSYR revealed the “new religion” of American teenagers as espoused by the lead researchers of the study, Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton. What they concluded was that today’s American teenagers have created their own personal belief system called “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD).”⁵ Because MTD does not seem to be able to survive independently, it gradually feeds off of one’s

2. Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010); “National Study of Youth & Religion,” University of Notre Dame, accessed June 4, 2016, www.youthandreligion.org. To find out more on this study, see Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 292-301.

3. Dean, *Almost Christian*, 311.

4. Dean, *Almost Christian*, 37.

5. Dean, *Almost Christian*, 13.

Christian faith, and then soon destroys it. The problem is that most teenagers have no idea that they have swapped one worldview for another. They assume that their beliefs are orthodox Christianity, but in reality, they are not. According to Smith and Denton, MTD looks like this:

1. A god exists who created and orders the world and watches over life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God is not involved in my life except when I need God to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.⁶

It is highly tenable that most teenagers would not only find MTD to be acceptable, but would probably not even notice the inconsistencies with Scripture. Young people are slowly finding themselves living in a narcissistic, “me-first” culture, and these five tenets fit snugly into this worldview.

This study and its evaluation certainly are helpful in understanding today’s emerging generation. Tim Elmore broadly defines this “Emerging Generation”: “The people I’m talking about are the latest wave of what is commonly called Generation Y, or the Millennials, generally defined as those born between 1984 and 2002. The Younger Millennials, born after 1990, resemble their earlier Gen Y counterparts in many ways, but in volumes of other ways they stand in stark contrast to them.”⁷

The sampling is appropriate and large enough to get a realistic picture of the beliefs of teenagers in America today. When a person grows and matures as a Christian, they develop what Dean calls a “consequential faith.”⁸ This type of faith is manifested in one’s life by being

6. Dean, *Almost Christian*, 13.

7. Tim Elmore, *Generation iY: Our Last Chance to Save Their Future* (Atlanta, GA: Poet Gardener, 2010), 13.

8. Dean, *Almost Christian*, 8.

distinctive, and by driving the person to live the Christian life daily. Consequently, a love for God and a love for others becomes normative and is even passed down to the next generation. A church that has members who live out this consequential faith is a church that has a deeper impact on the lives of its young people. In essence, to grow young Christians becomes, to a large extent, the responsibility of the entire church body. Although the study does seem to paint a relatively bleak picture, Dean offers numerous suggestions for help by providing a “toolbox” to assist in making one’s Christian faith “consequential.” The items in the toolbox include,

1. A creed – a personalized and articulated God-story and belief.
2. A community – where there is a sense of belonging with others, including adults.
3. A calling – an understanding of purpose and meaning to life.
4. A hope – a sense that God really is active in the world and moving.⁹

With these tools in hand, Dean adds that the church’s job is then to “till the soil, prepare the heart, ready the mind, still the soul, and stay awake so we notice where God is on the move, and follow.”¹⁰

The study also postulates several very powerful findings, many of which are germane to youth ministry and this thesis-project. First, Dean found that most American teenagers are active and affiliated with some sort of religion and religious organization. “More than 75% of U.S. Teens between the ages of 13 and 17 call themselves Christian, and nearly three in five youth say they attend religious services at least monthly.”¹¹ If nothing else, this should communicate to the church that students are interested in discovering more about religion, and hopefully, the Christian faith. Outreach efforts, although still very important, should be given a good

9. Dean, *Almost Christian*, 14.

10. Dean, *Almost Christian*, 168.

11. Dean, *Almost Christian*, 174.

evaluation. With these numbers in mind, perhaps less time, money and energy needs to be given to reaching out.

Second, the survey showed that most teenagers are following right along in their parents' footsteps.¹² This is great news, at least on paper. Certainly the lesson here is to develop ministries within the church that are discipling the parents of the Church's young people. Unlike a youth director, parents have unprecedented access to young people. Although "family time" and the "parent/child relationship" isn't what it used to be, moms and dads still have, if desired, the greatest opportunity to be an influence over their children. It is only when that influence is relinquished, generally due to a lack of desire, that this does not hold true. Because teens are involved in the local church, the church has an impact in their lives. But this impact pales in comparison to the parents.

Third, and a bit surprising, the majority of teenagers had a relatively positive view of religion and were not hostile toward it much at all.¹³ It would seem that the media would communicate otherwise, but this survey did not support that. On the other hand, American teenagers also indicated that religion was not really too big of a deal. Overall, the perspective was that religion is a good thing, but not something that had a life-changing or all-encompassing component.

Fourth, although today's teens are following in their parents' footsteps, that does not necessarily mean that is a positive thing. In fact, often it is not positive. At the same time, far and away the most positive Christian influence on American teens is their parents. "While

12. Dean, *Almost Christian*, 201.

13. Dean, *Almost Christian*, 202.

grandparents, other relatives, mentors, and youth ministers may be very influential, parents are most important in forming their children's spirituality."¹⁴

Fifth, the more a church provides for their teens, the more mature as Christians they become. Churches that provide dedicated Christian relationships, programming, mission trips and camps, growth opportunities, small groups, and challenges are most likely to have teens not only involved, but also engaged and invested.¹⁵ This is a significant uncovering. It is true that God is omnipresent, but it is also true that youth ministries have to get kids (and people in general) to where the Holy Spirit is. Camps, mission trips, even youth group is where students come in contact with God and make deeper commitments to him. This doesn't generally happen on the football field or at a high school dance. It happens when hearts and minds are attuned and open to God's holy calling, and there generally has to be some intentionality about that.

Sixth, teenagers are busy and distracted. The numerous facets of life that are vying for their time and attention (e.g. cell phones, social media, school, sports, the arts, etc.) are a normal part of their everyday lives, while their faith is optional.¹⁶ It is considered an add-on or an elective activity outside of the classroom if and when time permits. And far too often, time does not permit.

Seventh, and perhaps information that ought to be exalted, American teens who are highly active in their churches and their youth programs seem to be more successful in life than those who are not as active. Dean adds, "This supports the assumption that religious identities,

14. Dean, *Almost Christian*, 170.

15. Dean, *Almost Christian*, 177.

16. Dean, *Almost Christian*, 174.

organizations, and practices shape people's lives in important ways, despite the fact that most teenagers are only dimly aware that this is happening."¹⁷

And finally, Dean says there are three practices that are necessary for Christian formation and for handing on the faith to others. These three practices include translation, testimony, and detachment. Translation is our ability to model our authentic faith for teens. Dean adds, "Proximity matters. Teenagers' ability to imitate Christ depends, to a daunting degree, on whether we do."¹⁸ By testimony Dean argues that our ability (or a teen's ability) to speak about and articulate their faith is crucial in their development as Christ followers.¹⁹ A person's faith and a person's words go hand in hand. Finally, what Dean means by "detachment" really means a type of selflessness that empowers teens to begin thinking outside of themselves.²⁰ This is accomplished best by engaging them in mission trips, service projects, prayer practices, etc.

Dean encourages her readers to have a consequential faith, a belief system that is not benign, and the hope that young people have the ability to change their world. The church would be wise to make sure that their youth ministries are intentional about making that happen. Because, as Dean concludes, "At the end of this project, I find that I have arrived at only two conclusions with any confidence. Here is the first: When it comes to vapid Christianity, teenagers are not the problem—the church is the problem. And the second: the church also has the solution."²¹

17. Dean, *Almost Christian*, 172.

18. Dean, *Almost Christian*, 22.

19. Dean, *Almost Christian*, 23.

20. Dean, *Almost Christian*, 23.

21. Dean, *Almost Christian*, 160.

Youth Ministry: What's Gone Wrong and How to Get It Right
by David Olshine

David Olshine's book takes a hard-nosed and honest look at the state of modern youth ministry. With many years of youth ministry experience and wisdom, Olshine tackles every pertinent issue and offers superb recommendations. Covering all angles of ministry to youth, the content of this book proved to be a solid treaty for this thesis-project. The following are the eight highlights of Olshine's work as it pertains to developing a deeper youth ministry.

The very first issue Olshine addresses is the lack of inclusion of parents in our youth ministries. Olshine's point is that it is the parents' God-given purpose, calling, and responsibility to nurture the Christian faith in their children.²² Unfortunately, the truth of the matter is that most parents not only do not know that, but they are grossly unprepared to do so. In today's culture, most parents who are growing Christians are struggling just to nurture their own faith, much less the faith of others (including their own children). Of course this means that their children are being spiritually neglected. What's the solution? Olshine says that we need to "find ways to give the ball back to Christian parents—where it belongs—as the primary spiritual caregivers of their teens."²³ Olshine continues by proclaiming that it is scripture that admonishes us to do so. He even adds that youth ministry has contributed to the breakdown in the family as leader by enabling parents in this task. Parents are far too willing to abdicate responsibility to another person for the spiritual welfare of their child. Olshine suggests that youth ministries quit making

22. David Olshine, *Youth Ministry: What's Gone Wrong and How to Get It Right* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2013), 5.

23. Olshine, *Youth Ministry*, 7.

excuses and find ways (which he suggests) to get parents deeply involved in our youth ministries and, therefore, in the nurturing of their own kids' faith.²⁴

Next, Olshine discusses the importance of the role of the senior leadership in the church. Churches that continue to enable youth leaders to be “lone rangers” are quickly finding that that method does not work. Churches and youth ministries need senior pastors who have courage and a real interest in the church's youth program. Olshine adds, “We need God-called leaders who think critically and take risks with vision and passion.”²⁵

Related to the need for senior pastors to be visible and actively engaged in the life of the youth ministry is the need for youth ministers to be humble and others-centered. For far too long, youth ministers have had the pressure to be what Olshine calls “Rock Stars.”²⁶ It seems that there is an unwritten law that youth ministers should be surfers, guitar players, have long, blonde hair, know all of the latest technology, and know how to order any drink at Starbucks. Olshine says this has to change. This does not serve the youth minister well or the church. The problem is that people are attracted to leaders who are like that, especially young people. Their whole life seems centered around being popular, being “liked,” and being cool—like a rock star. Unfortunately, this does not create long-term discipleship success. Instead, wise youth ministers recognize the need for a better way. In essence, the wise youth leader will empower others to do a great deal of the ministry, which will help divert the focus off of them and onto Christ. In addition, Olshine

24. Olshine, *Youth Ministry*, 7.

25. Olshine, *Youth Ministry*, 23.

26. Olshine, *Youth Ministry*, 40.

suggests that youth ministers add staff when necessary, recruit parents and other adults, and re-think over-programming.²⁷ The humble youth leader will yield to these suggestions.

Next, the book asks a poignant question: “What are we trying to do?”²⁸ This, of course, is a great question and really *the* question for all youth ministries, and the church. Olshine’s perspective is that if we are trying to make disciples of Christ, we are not being successful. Our methodologies and the models we use are not working. They lack intentionality and they are, therefore, not long-lived. Olshine’s suggestion is to become youth ministries that are intentional and compelled by purpose.²⁹ He then offers four stages for spiritual maturity among young people. They are,

1. Teenage Seeker.
2. Adolescent Affiliation.
3. Clinging To or Letting Go of My Parents’ Faith.
4. Teenage Ownership.³⁰

These sequential stages are different than that of adults, and youth leaders need to be leery of that. If adhered to, they can have a powerful impact on how ministry is done to young people.

Somehow, youth ministries have gotten the idea that doing more is better than doing less. The average youth program—and that’s the right word for it—*programs* itself to death. The year is full of ample opportunities to do a new ministry “something.” And this is done primarily to get kids involved and to get numbers up. If more kids are attending, then the youth minister is being successful and the youth program is obviously achieving its goals (and, of course, blessed by

27. Olshine, *Youth Ministry*, 45.

28. Olshine, *Youth Ministry*, 52.

29. Olshine, *Youth Ministry*, 59.

30. Olshine, *Youth Ministry*, 61f.

God). Olshine's suggestion is that youth ministers have a purpose and intentionality to all of their programs and stop allowing attendance to dictate success.³¹ In shifting their thinking, today's youth minister would find deeper fulfillment if they were more concerned with creating disciples than creating higher attendance.

To help resolve the "rock star" youth minister mentality, Olshine proposes that youth ministers do a much better job at training and empowering volunteers. Instead of having to do nearly everything by himself or herself, a wise youth minister knows that the key to an outstanding youth ministry is to have a well-trained and equipped team of volunteers.³² They put their egos to the side and allow others to do the ministry. Unfortunately, most youth ministries lack good training. But, it needs to happen, and, if done right, will radically change the DNA of the youth program.

Even when all that Olshine recommends is followed, there is still the risk of what he calls "ingrown Christianity": "When youth groups feel superior or better than other groups, they have become ingrown. A youth group that doesn't want to grow or change and that resists letting new people in is what I call a 'holy huddle.'"³³ A thriving youth group is one that goes beyond the four walls of the youth room. Large youth ministries may look good, but stronger, healthier ones are those that break out of their "holy huddles" and strive to make an impact in the world.

And finally, deeper youth ministries are those that make a commitment to doing all they can to develop disciples by teaching biblical, evangelical Christianity. Far too often, American teens are entertained at youth group, but not challenged to dig deeper into the scriptures to

31. Olshine, *Youth Ministry*, 75-76.

32. Olshine, *Youth Ministry*, 49.

33. Olshine, *Youth Ministry*, 101.

understand biblical truth. Granted, our youth programs should be enjoyable and fun, but if that's all that is being done, that is unacceptable. Churches need to focus on helping to create biblically literate Christian young people.

These tenets that Olshine proposes are necessary to help move youth ministries from an entertainment and numbers-orientation approach to genuine discipleship-making ministries. The world is full of youth programs doing the former. Deeper youth ministries are healthier youth ministries and they impact the world for Christ and bring joy and honor to God.

Preaching Re-Imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith
by Doug Pagitt

In *Preaching Re-Imagined*, Doug Pagitt offers a new and enlightening look at how the church is to communicate the message of Jesus to its followers. The insights Pagitt offers are brilliant, if not also unconventional. According to research done at Psychotactics.com, most persons who have received a verbal message (lecture, sermon, address, discourse) retain only a small percentage of what they hear.³⁴ If such a small percentage is retained, and learned, by the audience, then the question of impact and effectiveness is also raised.³⁵ Pagitt offers several suggestions to aid in the communications process and in our ability to move students into a deeper place spiritually. If lecture and preaching is patently ineffective, another way should be sought.

34. Sean D'Souza, "How to Retain 90% of Everything You Learn," Psychotactics, accessed November 4, 2018, <http://www.psychotactics.com/blog/art-retain-learning/>.

35. According to Psychotactics.com only 5% of what is heard in a lecture is learned. These numbers, however, have been heavily scrutinized and questioned. In all likelihood, the overall point is still the same. But, according to numerous sources, the exact percentage of retention is suspect. See Will Thalheimer, "People Remember 10%, 20% ... Oh Really?" Work-learning Research, accessed November 4, 2018, http://www.willatworklearning.com/2006/05/people_remember.html.

First, Pagitt introduces a paradigm shift in how communicators ought to speak in front of a crowd. There is an issue or a problem that has existed for quite some time and it has not only gotten worse, but it actually continues to feed the church's inability to dig deeper with young people. The problem, according to Pagitt, is that those who stand in front of a church congregation neither "preach" nor "speak," but rather they "speech."³⁶ "Speeching," in a nutshell, is a problem because it uses the old-school style of communication where the relationship between the speaker and the audience is poor, or even non-existent. The speaker determines everything there is about the topic (including the subject, the content, the beginning and end, conclusions, etc.) and essentially eliminates any participation or engagement from the audience. "What's worse," he adds "speeching is an ineffectual means of communication, one that goes against the very reason we seek to live in Christian community to begin with, so our lives can be shaped as we journey together toward God."³⁷

But the real gem of the book was found in the discussion of "Implication vs. Application."³⁸ In today's culture and postmodern setting, people are often looking for answers to their questions, and solutions to their issues. They want to wrap the message they just heard into a neat little package so they can walk out and begin the process of "applying" what they just heard to their lives. As Pagitt puts it, "We have, over the last century, become people who believe in answers and application."³⁹ This actually sounds really good, and probably biblical. Who doesn't want to know how to apply what the scriptures say to their lives? But in actuality,

36. Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 48.

37. Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined*, 22.

38. Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined*, 95.

39. Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined*, 96.

that's probably not exactly how Paul and Jesus preached. They were far less interested in a three-step application message and much more interested in life-change. And that is the essence of "implication." As Pagitt illustrates,

Many of us were taught that part of the purpose of the sermon is to make the Word of God accessible to people, to make it easier for them to understand and live into. Stop and think about that for a minute. Is that really what preaching is for? Is that how Jesus or Paul preached? Some would say Jesus used parables to make the gospel more accessible, but Jesus' hearers were often just as confused by the parables as they were by his other words. The purpose of preaching isn't to make the Word of God easy; it's to help people delve into faith more fully, more deeply.⁴⁰

Application is important, but only after implication. Application allows us, even encourages us, to stay disconnected. We can appreciate and understand a story or a biblical truth, while at the same time staying a good distance from it. We can intellectualize it, but keep it from entering our hearts. But implication is an invitation to take the message and internalize it. If we articulate the message of the Good News to young people, and they are able to understand the implications of that in such a way that creates life change, Pagitt writes that we are then able to see new outcomes. A deeper youth ministry would manifest these outcomes as well. The following are a few of the outcomes Pagitt lists and how the implications of each should be lived out in our youth programs.

"I imagine churches where life is lived with open-eyed optimism."⁴¹

Youth ministries are to be realistic and, of course, recognize that sinfulness and evil exist in the world. But at the same time, we are to be vessels that offer hope and the sense that God is

40. Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined*, 101.

41. Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined*, 164.

alive and active in this world. This type of imagination should come from the youth leaders and their students as they work together in community.

“I imagine churches that live life in rhythm with God.”⁴²

As the Good News is lived out, it should be obvious in how one relates to God and to one another. An individual’s life should not be lived in a purely individualistic way; rather it should be lived in community with both Christians and non-Christians. A church’s youth ministry should be a wide-open safe haven for all young people. And as these young people come into our ministries, they should be curiously attracted to how we live and how we relate to and interact with one another.

“I imagine churches that believe deep friendships change people.”⁴³

Christ-followers are to live in community. Christians were made for that and were made to have a friendship with God’s Son, and with one another. This friendship must go beyond superficiality to a much deeper place. And the way to do that is to allow for vulnerability. Young people today are bent on doing all they can to prove their toughness and strength. The idea of being authentic and vulnerable is a difficult one for them to embrace. This, therefore, has to be modeled by the adult leadership team. Vulnerability in a youth ministry will help move it deeper.

42. Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined*, 165.

43. Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined*, 167.

“I imagine churches that seek to be full theological communities.”⁴⁴

The local church, Pagitt writes, “can be a place where we move from ‘cover versions’ of the faith of previous generations to living, breathing theological communities who articulate and generate new understandings of God, life, and faith.” This is a great truth that Pagitt imagines. Youth ministers must have the courage and the intention to create youth ministries that move young people theologically, consistently teaching and challenging students to “grow deeper by thinking theologically.” Students will come to your ministries for the fun and entertainment, but they will stay for the deeper experience. Creating theological communities helps in that endeavor.

“I imagine churches that see themselves as being for both the new convert and the experienced Christian.”⁴⁵

The author of this thesis-project understands and embraces the doctrine of “Prevenient Grace.” Prevenient grace is that grace that comes from God’s working in a person’s life over a period of time. The United Methodist Church defines it thus: “The divine love that surrounds all humanity and precedes any and all of our conscious impulses. This grace prompts our first wish to please God, our first glimmer of understanding concerning God’s will, and our ‘first slight transient conviction’ of having sinned against God.”⁴⁶ Pagitt adds that we ought to see our coming to Christ in this way: “Rather than seeing it as a one-time event, we ought to think of conversion as a lifelong process, one in which all of us are engaged all the time.”⁴⁷ This probably

44. Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined*, 168.

45. Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined*, 168.

46. “Distinctive Wesleyan Emphases,” United Methodist Church, accessed November 4, 2018, <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/distinctive-wesleyan-emphases1>.

47. Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined*, 168.

smacks up against some traditional theological thinking, but the point he makes is that those in youth ministry ought to welcome all students warmly regardless of where they are on their faith journeys. Their programs, along with relational-minded thinking, ought to create sensitivity and an awareness of their student's faith journey, regardless of the depth of that journey. When students are accepted right where they are, ministries are then in a position to move them deeper.

A deeper youth ministry focuses on speaking with students and not merely "speaching" at them most of the time. There is an intentionality about having relational conversations with them. When this occurs the student is in a position to be moved beyond application only to a deeper understanding of the implications of the Gospel story. Churches and youth ministries will then be better poised to take students deeper in their Christian faith journeys.

***Renovation of the Church: What Happens When a Seeker Church
Discovers Spiritual Formation***
by Kent Carlson and Mike Lueken

After a life-changing and ministry-changing retreat, authors Kent Carlson and Mike Lueken felt led by the Holy Spirit to transform their existing church from a consumer-minded, seeker-targeted, attendance-hungry, entertaining church into a discipleship-focused community of Christ followers. As best as they could they were doing everything in their ability to understand God's calling on their lives as pastors and then doing everything in their power to bring that calling to life. They were guilty, as are many churches, of "creating a monster"⁴⁸ that catered to the needs of the nominally committed Christian. And they were very successful at this monster. As their attendance and services grew, though, so did anxiety and pressure. They found themselves struggling each week with the task of out-performing the following week what they

48. Kent Carlson and Mike Lueken, *Renovation of the Church: What Happens When a Seeker Church Discovers Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 13.

had just done the previous week. “What would happen if we just stopped performing at this level for a few months?”⁴⁹ The pressure to be better, and cooler, and more entertaining each week took its toll. In addition, they realized that the monster they had created was not fulfilling the Great Commission. Lueken writes, “It slowly began to dawn on us that our method of attracting people was forming them in ways contrary to the way of Christ.”⁵⁰ He adds, “The clear call is to make disciples of Jesus who are immersed in a new, Trinitarian reality. Disciples are students. They are apprentices of a skillful master.”⁵¹

Youth ministers across the country can relate to the thoughts and feelings of Carlson and Lueken. The pressure is on almost relentlessly to build bigger, better youth programs. The first question youth ministers are generally asked is, “How many kids are in your youth program?” The inference being that the more kids that are involved in a youth program, the more successful the youth minister is. The pressure can be overwhelming. When in actuality, as Carlson and Lueken write, the real hope of ministry is to introduce students to Jesus and to help them grow as disciples.

Youth ministry can learn a great deal from this exposition. Although written by two senior pastors of a large church, the concepts are all transferable to any local youth ministry. A few of the key components focus on consumerism, egotism, and spiritual formation.

Churches and youth ministries alike are challenged to present an appealing product (Sunday worship or weeknight youth group) that will attract attendees. They have to get them through the door and then, once inside and a part of what is happening, the challenge is to keep

49. Carlson and Lueken, *Renovation of the Church*, 24.

50. Carlson and Lueken, *Renovation of the Church*, 35.

51. Carlson and Lueken, *Renovation of the Church*, 50.

them engaged and desiring to come back the next week. It is a paradoxical challenge because they are asked to “sell” a product (Jesus or the church or Christianity) while not appearing to be commercialized or materialistic.⁵² And if successful, it is easy to become enthralled with one’s own achievement. But commercialism and discipleship do not go well together. Carlson and Lueken made the very difficult decision to move away from anything that appeared to smack of commercialism. It was a difficult task and it cost them members. This is an ongoing challenge for those in youth ministry. It is relatively easy to attract attendees, but if the goal is to develop disciples, then that becomes much more difficult. As Carlson and Lueken did at their church, we need to be willing to address the issue head on and not be afraid of it.

Next, the authors address the issue of ego and ambition. It is an interesting idea to wrestle with when considering the Christian and popularity. How are “Christian celebrities” (sought after speakers, authors, bloggers, convention/seminar leaders, musicians, etc.) supposed to make a living if they are not being promoted? And who better to promote them than the person themselves? This creates quite a conundrum. It is fascinating to see self-promoting Christian artists on web sites, Twitter, YouTube, and other means of advertising espousing the virtues of the humble Christian life while creating their larger than life personas. As churches and youth ministries increase in number, it becomes increasingly easy to accept the credit for the “success.” Carlson and Lueken add, “The inner motivations that drive all of us are a tangled web of sincerity and self-absorption, nobility and narcissism. We are seldom as bad as people say we are. Nor as good.”⁵³ Keeping egos at bay while remaining ambitious with the things of Christ is a challenge, but one that needs to be intentionally recalled at every moment.

52. Carlson and Lueken, *Renovation of the Church*, 71.

53. Carlson and Lueken, *Renovation of the Church*, 78.

In finalizing their perspective on renovating the local church, the authors address spiritual formation. There probably is not a lot of talk about spiritual formation among young people these days. So that, in and of itself, makes that a challenge. But the authors laid out a few foundational ideas applicable for the church and any youth ministry.

1. Transformation happens in the specific details of our hearts and lives.

This again is a call for implication over practical application. God wants to invade the hearts and the lives of young people and be their reason for living. He's less interested in a checklist of "dos and don'ts," and more interested in our souls. Once we allow that to penetrate deep down inside of us, we are well on our way to discipleship. Transformation may start in the mind (Romans 12:2), but it has to get quickly to the heart.

2. To retrain our hearts and minds, we must take counterintuitive action.

As the Gospel gets deep into a person's heart (and, therefore, into every fiber of their being) that person naturally begins to be more Christ-like. This Christlikeness "spills out" all over the place and individuals become models for the Kingdom. When a true Christ follower is confronted with a situation that challenges them to be anything but like Jesus, it is then that they are to remind themselves to act and/or react in a new and different way. Carlson and Lueken comment, "It's an intensely practical way to start cultivating a new heart out of which new things can flow. Counterintuitive action thrusts us beyond the borders of our comfort zones and into unfamiliar territory where we are more dependent on God."⁵⁴

54. Carlson and Lueken, *Renovation of the Church*, 124.

3. Personal transformation has implications far beyond the individual.

The beauty of the transformed life is that it is not merely individualistic. It spreads out, touches, and impacts those persons who are around it. In doing so, it brings with it power. Power to change a church, power to change a youth ministry, and the power to spread the Gospel. When church/youth ministries begin to be comprised of “transformed” individuals, the collective whole is changed. This can lead to wonderful things and can overcome a great deal of imperfections. A youth ministry made up of kids and adults who have been radically changed by the Holy Spirit is in a very real way what the church was meant to be.

***They Like Jesus but Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations* by Dan Kimball**

Immersed in ministry to the emerging generation, Dan Kimball offers a unique and calculated insight into doing ministry with those who may not be so impressed with the local church. His work, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church*, is the result of real-life ministry with a group of volunteers who were willing to delve into numerous conversations with the author. As a result, Kimball was able to bring to light the thoughts, feelings and attitudes this younger emerging generation has toward Jesus and the church.

Right at the beginning, Kimball urges his readers, presumably Christians, “not [to] be weaklings.”⁵⁵ Speaking to a large group of middle-aged pastors Kimball even surprised himself when he called them all weaklings. He followed this up by telling them to be bold and by telling them that they needed to get out of their church offices and meet people where they are. He writes, “It’s too easy to get caught in our little church subcultures, and the result is that the only

55. Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 11.

younger people we might know are Christians who are already inside the church.”⁵⁶ The fact of the matter is that we are living in an increasingly postmodern, non-Christian world.⁵⁷ Today’s emerging generation knows very little about the Christian faith, the bible, or their story in it. To reach those outside our church walls, we need to be courageous and creative in our evangelism and not expect young people just to show up at our door. To do this, we must think like missionaries. Kimball adds, “Instead of viewing our towns and cities as Judeo-Christian and feeling that everyone needs to automatically adhere to what we believe, we need to act like missionaries do when they enter a different culture.”⁵⁸ Although easier said than done, this is exactly what a courageous youth ministry does. For many decades, the church has allowed its youth programs to develop the best youth gathering around and expected young people to flock to it. This worked a few decades ago; not so much anymore. Young people need to think outside of themselves and endeavor to be the ones who do the inviting. A youth program can have slick advertising, great facilities, cool graphics, and special effects, but outsiders will not attend unless invited by a friend.

Next, Kimball articulates six things that the non-church-going emerging generation person objects to, and thinks about, the church. These six include,

1. The church is an organized religion with a political agenda.
2. The church is judgmental and negative.
3. The church is dominated by males and oppresses females.
4. The church is homophobic.
5. The church arrogantly claims all other religions are wrong.
6. The church is full of fundamentalists who take the whole Bible literally.⁵⁹

56. Kimball, *They Like Jesus*, 13.

57. Kimball, *They Like Jesus*, 15.

58. Kimball, *They Like Jesus*, 30.

59. Kimball, *They Like Jesus*, 73-185.

All of these issues are germane to our youth programs. A healthy youth ministry tackles these issues without hesitancy or apology. The goal is not always to have the absolute right answer (some of these issues will be debated until Christ himself returns), but to be in dialogue with young people who are struggling to know answers, and to know truth. But youth leaders must wrestle with these issues and be prepared to give an answer for what they believe. Youth ministries need to move from only addressing simpler, surface-level topics and delve into these deeper ones. Today's younger, emerging generation will be grateful.

Kimball wraps up his book by listing a handful of qualities the emerging generation would like to have in a church. These are important because, as the book title says, they “don’t like the church.” The list includes the following,

1. I wish church were not just a sermon or a lecture but a discussion.
2. I wish the church would respect my intelligence.
3. I wish the church weren’t about the church building.
4. I wish church was less programmed and allowed time to think and pray.
5. I wish the church were a loving place.
6. I wish the church cared for the poor and for the environment.
7. I wish the church taught more about Jesus.⁶⁰

All of these points are valid and need to be intentionally targeted in today’s churches and youth ministries. Doing so would help to grow deeper-minded disciples. If there were more discussions with teens (and not lectures or “speeches”), if things were taken more seriously at times with teens, if more contemplative thought were given, if more service was intentionally programmed outside of the church building, if Christians were extraordinarily loving, if there were genuine care for those in the communities that surrounded churches, and if youth ministries were Christocentric in their approach, young people would develop a deeper faith.

60. Kimball, *They Like Jesus*, 218-228.

Reinventing Youth Ministry (Again): From Bells and Whistles to Flesh and Blood
by Wayne Rice

Youth ministry guru, Wayne Rice, in his book *Reinventing Youth Ministry (Again): From Bells and Whistles to Flesh and Blood*, presents in his enjoyable style a bit of the history of youth ministry and then articulates the direction it is going, and needs to go, today. As a “lifer” in youth ministry with decades of experience and wisdom, Rice has a unique platform from which to speak. The book covers a multitude of expert information and encouragement, but the three areas most pertinent are in the areas of parent involvement, unity in the church, and youth ministry programming.

Rice proclaims that we are to see youth ministry more and more as a ministry to young people and a ministry to, with, for, and by parents. Rice’s position is that the parent is the most powerful and primary influence in a kid’s life. He writes,

What we now know is that teenagers pretty much follow in the faith footsteps of their parents. If parents are following Jesus, there's a good to excellent chance their kids will follow Jesus too. If they aren't, they won't. There are no guarantees, of course, but parents function as the spiritual leaders in their home whether they want to or not. That's their role, given to them by God.⁶¹

In many ways, the church has all but kicked the parents out of their youth programs. Youth ministers are wise to talk unashamedly about how they love parents and desperately want them vitally involved in their ministries. Rice adds, “I have all the respect in the world for youth workers in the church, but I’ve become more and more convinced over the years that God never gave to youth workers the responsibility for making disciples of other people’s kids.”⁶² Youth leaders would be wise to make this an integral part of their everyday youth ministries.

61. Wayne Rice, *Reinventing Youth Ministry (Again): From Bells and Whistles to Flesh and Blood* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 23.

62. Rice, *Reinventing Youth Ministry*, 24.

Next, Rice addresses the importance of unity in and for the entire church. This unity must begin with the support and vision of the Senior Pastor and church leadership as well as all the generations in the body. He adds,

Many churches, in their efforts to be relevant and responsive to the needs of young adults have marginalized and abandoned their old folks.... What bothers me is that the young people of the church are missing out on the incredible vitality and wisdom and spiritual strength of people like my aunt Mabel and other members of her generation who are no longer considered an important part of the church.⁶³

A highly functioning, healthy congregation is generally made up of a church staff and members who love Jesus and who are passionate about being a growing, relational, loving family. When there is dissension, this can fracture the church and create numerous issues. As a result, all ministries suffer.⁶⁴ Unfortunately, this is often the rule, rather than the exception. Youth ministers have learned by default that they must survive in the midst of this, and this is not healthy. It is a survival by requisite, and not a thriving through unity. When the entire church is together, moving in the same direction, loving one another and excited about the direction they are going, great ministry can happen. And this naturally flows over into the youth program. A youth ministry that is genuinely loved by the folks of the church is a youth ministry poised to thrive.

Finally, Rice challenges his readers (primarily youth ministers, to be sure) to evaluate and reevaluate their programming. Is what they are doing truly pointing their students to a deeper relationship with Christ, or are the programs actually counterproductive?⁶⁵ Youth ministers who choose to allow the “programming” to suffer a bit in their attempt to take kids deeper and grow

63. Rice, *Reinventing Youth Ministry*, 182.

64. Rice, *Reinventing Youth Ministry*, 183.

65. Rice, *Reinventing Youth Ministry*, 173.

more authentic disciples will come to reap the benefits. And that decision to do so does not come without some growing pains. Ministries may shrink in size some, and that may be questioned. But what is not questioned is the overall intent and, oftentimes, the result. The “fun and games” can still be integrated and kids can still have a great time, but the desire must be there first and foremost to take kids deeper with Jesus.

Rice concludes things with what he perceives is the future of youth ministry. His final few points are critical in helping to grow deeper young disciples. He writes,

- The spiritual formation of children wasn’t reserved for the Sabbath day or for special times or corporate worship in the temple or synagogue; it was to take place in the daily routines of life and home.⁶⁶
- The spiritual formation of children was the responsibility of not only the immediate family but also the entire faith community.⁶⁷
- Reinventing youth ministry has to begin by taking parents and families seriously. But they cannot do it alone; they need their faith community.⁶⁸
- We must attend to “the one thing!” There are many messages that we can communicate to kids, but only one that really matters in the end. It is the message of our redemption from sin, the loving sacrifice that Jesus made for us on the cross. If the young people who attend our youth groups aren’t getting that message, then nothing we do really matters all that much.⁶⁹

It is clear that Rice advocates that youth ministries work with families, parents and the entire congregation to develop young disciples, and to pass the faith down from one generation to the next. If adhered to, the power of parenting, along with the support of the church body, and with discipleship modeling by the youth minister and their adult leadership team, will go a long

66. Rice, *Reinventing Youth Ministry*, 166.

67. Rice, *Reinventing Youth Ministry*, 167.

68. Rice, *Reinventing Youth Ministry*, 168.

69. Rice, *Reinventing Youth Ministry*, 198.

way toward helping students to develop a deep, integrated faith that will last well beyond their adolescent years.

The Next Story: Life and Faith after the Digital Explosion
by Tim Challies

Students live in such a fast-paced, rapidly changing culture that they can get swept up into it (and the garbage that accompanies it) without ever really recognizing it. Before they know it, they are deluged in a world that is anything but Christian, and the digital world probably does that more rapidly and with more intensity than any other. Jesus warns his followers that, “A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of” (Luke 6:45). To a large extent, Challies challenges his readers to be savvy Christians who navigate through the evil that is so prevalent in the digital world. He cleverly walks his readers through a brief history of digital technology beginning first with the Tsar Bomba, a 50-megaton bomb detonated by the Russian military in 1961. Challies goes on to say that this bomb literally destroyed everything beneath it, and yet everything was still there ... only it was different. It was changed.⁷⁰ Digital technology is ever-altering and changing and therefore impacting and changing the world beneath it (and around young people). Students are so immersed in the digital world that they must address and come to grips with the question, “Do you own your technology or does it own you?” Unfortunately, many young people seem entirely glued to and captured by technology that it does, indeed, seem to own them.

⁷⁰ Tim Challies, *The Next Story: Life and Faith after the Digital Explosion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 3.

The Next Story addresses the world of youth ministry and technology in two ways. The first section is organized around the technology itself and the impact it has on today's emerging generation. The information is alarming. Although a "necessary evil," technology has an insidious capacity to damage young hearts and minds. In large part, today's kids are distracted, and the digital explosion has not only added to this distraction, it has accelerated it. This digitally enhanced distraction is a powerful enemy. It leaves in its wake a world of young people who are beginning to exhibit the following three characteristics,

1. They are shallow in their thinking.
2. They "skim" information (e.g. web pages, blogs, tweets, texts, Facebook, and more) instead of reading.
3. They are devilishly astute at multi-tasking.⁷¹

Challies adds, "We surround ourselves by too many stimuli, we force our brains into a state of continuous partial attention, a state in which we keep tabs on everything without giving focused attention to anything."⁷² People forsake quality for quantity and buy into the belief that speed and productivity are the ultimate goal. They try to do more and more and lose the ability "to engage in deeper ways of thinking and concentrated focused thought," leading to what Challies calls "shallow thinking and shallow living."⁷³ And for the church and youth ministries, this will also lead to shallow ministry.

The second section organizes itself around the person using the technology, which for this thesis-project is the youth minister, the youth ministry team, and young people. Challies says that to combat the ever-consuming diversion of technology, we must learn to live an undistracted life. "If we are to live deep lives, lives that truly matter, we must first fill our hearts and minds

71. Challies, *The Next Story*, 116f.

72. Challies, *The Next Story*, 125.

73. Challies, *The Next Story*, 108.

with deep thoughts, thoughts that truly matter. Distraction is the enemy of deep thinking, and it is an enemy we must seek out and destroy.”⁷⁴ Challies lists several keys to living a life undistracted by technology. Being undistracted, asserts Challies, allows for great spiritual benefit. The list includes,

- Discover Distraction – Before one can begin to deal with the things that distract them, they need to take an inventory and discover what it is that is really doing that. When they do discover what those things are, Challies says to “measure your use of media, find the beeps, and find what dulls.”⁷⁵ The goal is to eliminate the mindless distractions that keep individuals from being sharp and deep.
- Destroy Distraction – Once the discovery has been made as to what it is that is a distraction, the key now is to destroy it. That can be done most effectively by “deleting and unsubscribing,” and “focusing on substance.”⁷⁶
- Cultivate Concentration – Learning to live a life of distraction took time and learning, and undoing that will take the same. One must be intentional and work on it. Two suggestions he makes are writing (actually putting pen to paper), and developing the skill of focusing. Be willing to spend more time with fewer things. Choose quality over quantity.⁷⁷
- Seek Solitude – The goal is to replace the distraction with something favorable and positive. Three beneficial ways in which to do that, as suggested by Challies, are to “take a digital fast, take a digital vacation, and carve out digital free times.”⁷⁸

Digital technology can be a great tool in the hands of a youth minister. It can also be a great burden. Taking what Challies has prescribed and applying it to youth ministry would be a wise move. Technology is one of the big hindrances to the deeper life. Church youth ministries need to recognize that sooner than later. Students are counting on (and need) adults who can help

74. Challies, *The Next Story*, 122.

75. Challies, *The Next Story*, 132

76. Challies, *The Next Story*, 124.

77. Challies, *The Next Story*, 125.

78. Challies, *The Next Story*, 126.

them navigate the technology maze. They need astute teaching so they can learn to discern the truth about God's world and the truth about technology. This will give them a much better chance of living the deeper life they were created to live.

Deep Church: A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional
by Jim Belcher

It takes very little effort to make the leap with and apply the valuable information in this book to today's youth ministries. The areas Belcher targets for the church are nearly the same for the church's youth program, if indeed the hope is to develop a deeper youth ministry. This thesis-project will interact with a few of those tenets.

First, Belcher promotes the need for deep truth. In essence, the discussion centers on what is truth and does it attract people and keep them engaged? Belcher believes that people not only desire a church that allows them to dig deeper in their faith, but they yearn for it.⁷⁹ He uses a brilliant illustration to communicate his point taken from Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch's book *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church*,

In some farming communities, the farmers might build fences around their properties to keep their livestock in and the livestock of neighboring farms out. This is a bounded set. But in rural communities where farms or ranches cover an enormous geographic area, fencing the property is out of the question. In our home of Australia, ranches (called stations) are so vast that fences are superfluous. Under these conditions a farmer has to sink a bore and create a well, a precious water supply in the Outback. It is assumed that livestock, though they will stray, will never roam too far from the well, lest they die. That is a centered set. As long as there is a supply of clean water, the livestock will remain close by.⁸⁰

79. Jim Belcher, *Deep Church: A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 86.

80. Belcher, *Deep Church*, 86.

Youth ministries, like churches, can be wells that draw our young people in where they find the sustenance they need. And perhaps even more so than the church body, youth programs must be “safe sanctuaries” that not only welcome kids in, but actively seek those who are “out.” Every student has to know that they are beyond welcomed, and if they do, they will be more than open to digging deeper.

Next Belcher discusses what deep evangelism looks like. Traditional churches want people to make a commitment to Christ first, and then become a part of the body. The Emerging Church takes the position of inviting any and every one in, and through their time in community they will come to get connected. Belcher’s “third way” is a little different, and certainly appropriate for youth ministries. Essentially, others are invited in and welcomed and taught the distinctives of the Christian faith. Then, at some point, because of and through deeper relationships, they are challenged to make a move toward Christ.⁸¹ This is classic youth ministry, but not too many youth programs still work this way. Far too often, students become involved in a youth program, perhaps for years, without ever really being invited to make a deeper commitment to Jesus. This is, in part, the reason that so many students graduate from their youth programs, and then from the church.

The discussion of deep worship is targeted next in Belcher’s book. The emerging generation loves worship and seeks it out. Whereas youth ministries 20+ years ago had “singing” (generally audience participation songs that were fun and silly), today youth programs “worship.” Worship is an absolutely vital part of the emerging generation’s Christian experience. According to Belcher, deeper worship involves adhering not only to scripture, but to tradition as well. At the same time, Belcher wants to make sure that their worship is accessible to those who

81. Belcher, *Deep Church*, 90.

might be visiting or new in the faith. “Keeping all three – Bible, tradition, and culture – in mind, we are able to craft a worship service that is simultaneously countercultural and culturally relevant.”⁸² Not all of what Belcher discusses in his “Deep Worship” chapter applies to local youth programs, but much of it does. Deeper youth ministries do not “dumb down” worship. They are intentional about taking students, many of whom may have just graduated from “children’s church,” and walking with them through this new worship journey. And for the most part, if the bible, tradition, and culture are attended to, young people are enamored by experience.

Belcher turns his attention next to deep preaching. And although he differs in his approach and thoughts from Pagitt’s *Preaching Re-Imagined*, his insights are still very pertinent. It has been assumed over the years that young people do not want to be challenged intellectually. They come to youth group ready for a break (from school, primarily) and ready to have fun. And for the most part, there is some truth in that. Youth ministers often refer to the three ‘F’s of youth ministry: “Food, Friends, and Fun.” But today’s emerging generation also does not want their time to be wasted, especially as they grow a bit older. Older students are ready to move away from the silliness and games aspect of many youth programs. Again, they’ll accept (and even enjoy) the fun, as long as there is a deeper payoff at some point during the evening. So even though Belcher differs from Pagitt, the difference is primarily in style and/or delivery. Both still contend that deeper material is needed. Belcher prefers a “centered-set hermeneutic” by providing a message that communicates the “life-giving power of living water via the redemptive drama that runs from Genesis to Revelation.”⁸³ This deeper approach to preaching works for

82. Belcher, *Deep Church*, 137.

83. Belcher, *Deep Church*, 158.

Belcher, and it works in youth ministry. Youth ministries do not have to abandon deeper messages; they do, however, have to know the best way to deliver those messages to an emerging generation.

As stated earlier, much of Belcher's insights in *Deep Church* are easily transferable to youth ministry. In fact, one would be hard-pressed to convince most church leaders that the youth in attendance at a youth group are not the church. As the younger part of the body, students need youth leaders who are intentional about leading them to a deeper truth, deeper evangelism, deeper worship, and deeper preaching.

***Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*
by Mark Dever**

Often a great book written about the church can easily be used to teach youth leaders and youth ministers about youth ministry. This is such a book. The principle points discussed in *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* are easily transferrable to the “church” of youth ministry. Dever writes, “Certainly no church is perfect. But, thank God, many imperfect churches are healthy.”⁸⁴ A deep church, as well as a deep youth ministry, is healthy. In essence, what Dever does throughout this book is build his case for a “healthy” church (not a perfect church) by suggesting nine pillars upon which to build. He also adds,

This book, then, is a plan for recovering biblical preaching and church leadership at a time when too many congregations are languishing in a notional and nominal Christianity, with all the resulting pragmatism and pettiness. The purpose of too many evangelical churches has fallen from glorifying God to growing larger, assuming that numerical growth, however achieved, must glorify God.⁸⁵

84. Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 28.

85. Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 28.

Again, this is certainly true of many youth programs. Their aim is to build attendance and not so much to develop a deeper faith in their participants. And as Dever says, this approach leaves many youth ministries in the nominal Christianity neighborhood.

The youth ministry at Suntree United Methodist Church, in many aspects, was a perfect example of this. The ministry attracted numerous students to their weekly meeting, but the depth of what happened there was embarrassingly shallow. It took a concerted effort on the part of the youth minister, the youth volunteers, and many parents to “right the ship.” But, after a period of three years, the ministry was healthier and “on the right course.” Much of this happened because of the passion of those involved to make it happen, and because many of the nine recommendations that Dever makes in this book were adhered to. These nine recommendations he makes for the church also serve as foundational for any youth ministry.

1. Expositional Preaching⁸⁶

Expositional preaching, in youth ministry, can be a real challenge. Even the word “preaching” is not one that is easily used in the average youth program. Youth ministry generally tends to lean toward “topical preaching,” addressing the many issues that today’s youth are facing. And that’s not a bad idea. But, those topics need to be addressed biblically, whereby the youth minister rightly exegetes the scripture in regard to the topic of the day. For example, if the topic that a particular youth program is addressing is “social media” (certainly a worthy subject today!), a wise youth minister will search the scriptures and endeavor to explain what the bible has to say regarding that topic. Then, the youth minister will offer practical steps for each student to take to live the Christian life in the midst of this social media onslaught.

86. Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 39-63.

2. Biblical Theology⁸⁷

Again, this is another challenge for the typical youth minister. It takes years to begin to understand the scriptures at a deep level and years to acquire the necessary wisdom to lead a group of Christians as the youth minister must do. In addition, the youth minister must gain a thorough understanding of his or her own denomination's theology. These are of vital importance for any youth ministry, like any church.

3. The Gospel⁸⁸

This is, plain and simple, "gospel presentation." Because youth ministry is involved in camps and retreats, mission trips and service projects, and ancillary ministry programs (like lock-ins, day-long trips, event parties, etc.), the presentation of the gospel is oftentimes a part of the agenda. Still, youth ministry can far too often wind up addressing their students' daily school/peer-pressure types of needs and shy away from sin, death, and the price Jesus paid for everyone on the cross. A deeper youth ministry will present the gospel often and when necessary.

4. A Biblical Understanding of Conversion⁸⁹

Without a biblical understanding of conversion, and the intentional presentation of it, youth ministries truly do become primarily a place for fun and games. Fortunately, this is where

87. Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 65-84.

88. Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 85-104.

89. Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 105-126.

a lot of youth ministries have done a good job. Youth ministers are generally committed to presenting the gospel and the conversion narrative.

5. A Biblical Understanding of Evangelism⁹⁰

Here, again, is where a lot of youth ministries fall short. The tendency is to let this characteristic fall to the wayside, or let the adults in the church take care of evangelism. But in doing so, we disregard much of the truths of scripture. It is imperative that we who are in youth ministry must be about the task of teaching and encouraging our students to evangelize. It is students who have the best opportunity to reach students for Christ.

6. A Biblical Understanding of Membership⁹¹

Dever writes, “Church membership entails a life of repentance and belief. God established the church to be the community of those who have been born again.”⁹² Certainly church membership is important and everyone who calls on the name of Jesus ought to become a member of the body. This is not so much the case in youth ministry. A healthy, strong youth ministry will encourage, and even challenge, their students to membership. Youth ministry is probably more of a portal to membership, than the place for membership itself. The youth ministry at Suntree United Methodist Church, along with the church itself, tends to welcome with open arms anyone who wishes to participate and attend. But, it is our strong desire that those who are in attendance soon make the move toward membership.

90. Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 127-154.

91. Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 155-180.

92. Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 170.

7. Biblical Church Discipline⁹³

Church discipline is another tough challenge for youth ministry. But, it can, and should be done! There is an old youth ministry adage that goes, “Kids don’t care how much you know, until they know how much you care.”⁹⁴ An adult youth leader or youth minister demonstrates their love and care for their students by being in a position to confront any given student on disciplinary issues. But this is a great challenge. In youth ministry, there really is not “membership” and so the opportunity to confront students can be tedious at best. The best way to have it happen is for there to be an agreement made between the students and the youth ministry and/or ministry team. At Suntree United Methodist Church, this type of agreement is done each and every year at the beginning of the year with its student leadership team. These students understand the commitment they are making and are in agreement with it. The Youth Pastor is then given permission to be able to confront students lovingly on difficult, personal topics.

8. A Concern for Discipleship and Growth⁹⁵

This pillar, and the commitment to discipleship, is truly the key component to a deeper church and youth ministry. A lack of a true commitment to discipleship is perhaps the primary reason so many youth ministries have tarnished reputations. By virtue of the fact that youth programs have to deal with and attract young people, there will probably always be an element

93. Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 181-206.

94. Who first coined this phrase and its many variations—substitute “kids” with “people,” “they,” “children,” “patients,” or “nobody”—seems to be a matter of some debate. Nevertheless, the truth of the adage stands.

95. Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 207-230.

of craziness, fun and games, etc. But that does not mean discipleship has to suffer. As Dever says,

A healthy church has a pervasive concern with church growth – not simply growing numbers but growing members. A church full of growing Christians is the kind of church growth I want as a pastor. Some today seem to think that one can be a “baby Christian” for a whole lifetime. Growth is seen to be an optional extra for particularly zealous disciples. But be very careful about taking that line of thought. Growth is a sign of life.⁹⁶

Exactly. And this is absolutely true for youth ministry.

9. Biblical Church Leadership⁹⁷

According to Dever, the final mark of a healthy church is found in its leadership.

Leadership is absolutely a vital marker in having a deep, healthy church and youth ministry.

Both churches and youth programs are destroyed due to poor leadership. Dever’s four components of biblical leadership, “Boss, Out Front, Supply, and Serve,” are all powerful aspects of excellent, Christian leadership.⁹⁸ These four elements serve not only the church, but any youth ministry as well.

Along with the nine outstanding markers of a healthy church, Dever adds four final “tips” to help implement the changes in an unhealthy church. They are,

1. Be truthful.
2. Be trustful.
3. Be positive.
4. Be particular (contextualize God’s concern for his church).⁹⁹

96. Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 225.

97. Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 231-256.

98. Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 250-253.

99. Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 261-262.

Again, all of this, with perhaps a bit of tweaking, would serve any youth ministry well. In doing so, this would usher in a deeper approach and impact and help drive a deeper youth ministry.

Becoming a Healthy Church: Ten Traits of a Vital Ministry
by Stephen A. Macchia

It's not uncommon to read a book, declare it wildly successful and helpful, and then walk away without ever really knowing how to utilize it in the future. This is not the case with Macchia's book. Clearly drawing from years of experience and practical insight, Macchia walks his audience through heartfelt lessons and information all to encourage them on how to develop a healthier church.

As a means of displaying needed importance, Macchia first informs his readers of the efficacy of two essential ingredients of a healthy church: God's Word and prayer. This is not only admirable, but certainly necessary. And these two ingredients, although appearing to be very practical (which they are) are practical (and useful) only for the pastor who genuinely employs them in his or her life! It's easy to put edicts like that into print, but there can be quite a gulf between that and the person who authentically puts them into his or her daily life. It is apparent that Macchia truly does this.

Macchia first lists some foundational truths that are necessary before a church body even begins to think about putting the ten traits into practice. This is brilliant. We all want the quick answers. But Macchia brings us back to the drawing board first by saying, "In addition to an

emphasis on God's Word and prayer, the one hundred churches we visited revealed nine common indicators of health."¹⁰⁰ These nine common indicators include the following,

1. Love, acceptance, and forgiveness.
2. Relational integrity.
3. Hunger for personal growth.
4. Shift from traditional to contemporary music.
5. Prayer.
6. Relationship-centered ministry.
7. Use of personal stories.
8. Service.
9. Networking.¹⁰¹

A church that exhibits these characteristics would certainly seem to be a healthy church. If not healthy yet, certainly well on their way. At the same time, these tenets are absolutely key ingredients to a healthy youth ministry. In fact, it has been the experience of this author that most youth ministries are very intentional about making sure these are happening in their programs. The only exception, perhaps, would be a "hunger for personal growth" which is really part of the job of a youth minister: to help create within a student a hunger and desire for a deeper relationship with God. When these nine markers are in place and happening, the youth program is probably well on its way to being healthy, strong, attractive to other teens, and positioned to produce young disciples.

Macchia then, before unveiling his ten traits, introduces three categories that these ten traits fit into. Macchia writes, "These levels are unique in their orientation and represent varying degrees of importance and relevance."¹⁰² Listed by strength, first to third, these categories are as follows,

100. Stephen A. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church: Ten Traits of a Vital Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 1999), 19.

101. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church*, 19-22.

102. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church*, 22.

1. How I relate with God.
2. How I relate with my church family.
3. How my church ministers and manages.

These three categories are centered on relating to God first, then relating to the church family, and then finally to the community surrounding the church. This is similar to Suntree United Methodist Church's Vision Statement: "To be followers of Jesus who love God, love each other, and love our neighbors in extraordinary ways."¹⁰³

The real meat of the text, of course, was found in the next ten chapters where Macchia supports his premise above found in these three initial categories. In order, they are,

1. God's Empowering Presence.
2. God-Exalted Worship.
3. Spiritual Disciplines.
4. Learning and Growing in Community.
5. A Commitment to Loving and Caring Relationships.
6. Servant-Leadership Development.
7. An Outward Focus.
8. Wise Administration and Accountability.
9. Networking with the Body of Christ.

These are powerful chapters, and powerfully loaded recommendations to help propel any church, and any youth ministry, toward health and spiritual depth. They certainly run against the all too common philosophy of many youth programs that seek fun, games, and a majestic following on social media! The quest for popularity rarely includes the aforementioned ten traits. But the youth minister, and youth program, that understands the importance of these qualities will go a long way toward developing true disciples of Christ.

103. Suntree United Methodist Church, "Our Mission & Vision," April 18, 2010, accessed November 4, 2018, <http://www.suntreeunitedmethodist.org/about/our-mission-vision/>.

Addressing the Assumptions and the Premise of this Thesis-Project

The Person of the Youth Pastor

What does it look like to be the leader of a “deep youth ministry”? This is one of the questions that was asked at the beginning of this thesis-project. Almost all of the information above applies equally to students, to their youth ministries, but also to the youth minister. Adults cannot take a group of students deeper than they are themselves. They can try, but the inauthenticity of the process will eventually preclude it from happening. The youth minister must also be a spiritually deep and growing person. Kenda Creasy Dean explains that we are to have a “consequential faith,” which is her way of saying ‘a deep faith,’ and recognize the influences in the culture, which have led younger people to adopt a religion labeled “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.”¹⁰⁴ This deeper faith is one that comes from being genuinely led by the Holy Spirit in such a way that it impacts how a person lives their life and it leads one to have a calling in their life. When a person is led by the Holy Spirit and recognizes this calling on their life, he or she begins to lead a life of purpose. The purpose of youth ministry is to pass this faith life down to the students involved in the local church’s youth program by modeling for them what being a Christian really is. Our faith is no longer a “checklist” Christianity; rather it is authentic and deep and compels us to evangelize others.

But this must be done in humility and transparency. David Olshine suggests that Christians take an honest look at egos and ambitions to make sure they are in line with their calling and pleasing to their Heavenly Father. They must overcome the “rock star” image that so many churches crave and youth ministers desire. By owning their faith and recognizing their allegiance with Jesus, this can happen.

104. Dean, *Almost Christian*, 13.

The hope of developing deeper friendships moves from wishful thinking to reality as we become further involved in our Christian community/church. These deeper friendships provide the youth minister with edification, encouragement, and accountability, all of which move us deeper. In addition, youth ministers can take their challenges and struggles to their friends.

Further, when Christians begin to understand the things in their lives that are a distraction and, as a result, keep their eyes off of Jesus, they are poised to grow deeper. Recognizing the many interruptions, perhaps particularly with technology, is one way youth ministers can grow and, again, provide an example for those around them. This is not always an easy process. The youth ministry landscape is cluttered with those who have failed. But by being in deeper relationships and a loving, Christian community, the success rate grows tremendously. As Dan Kimball writes, youth leaders cannot be “weaklings.”¹⁰⁵ They must live their lives courageously and that will springboard them into leading courageous youth ministries.

All of this hinges on Paul’s encouragement in the book of Romans to live transformed lives. Paul writes, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:2). In some ways, a modernized vernacular may be the phrase Wayne Rice concluded with when he proposed that youth leaders “do the one thing!”¹⁰⁶ Committing our lives to Jesus, being led by God’s Holy Spirit, putting away distractions, being in a strong faith community, developing authentic relationships, and doing “the one thing” God has called us to do, will lead to a deeper life and deeper youth ministry.

105. Kimball, *They Like Jesus*, 11.

106. Rice, *Reinventing Youth Ministry*, 198.

The Non-Negotiable Elements

The next question posed was, “What has to happen in a church to foster an environment that develops a deeper youth ministry?” The answer to this question is not too unlike the answer to the previous question above. Youth programs must be like incubators that engulf students with so much love and warmth and intentionality that the process of regeneration and sanctification can’t help but happen. Youth ministers need to instill within their students the assurance of their Christian faith, and give them the tools that make them bold and courageous, so much so that they can recognize false teachings like Moral Therapeutic Deism, and be transformed in such a way as to live out their “consequential faith.”

In *Preaching Re-Imagined*, Doug Pagitt dreams aloud with his lofty “imagination” that paint a beautiful picture of what a healthy youth ministry could look like. What a deeply spiritual, transformative life students would live if they were able to live out these imaginations. Students are blessed if they are indeed optimistic, living in rhythm with God, enjoying deep friendships, understanding a community that teaches full theology, and is warmly accepting of students from all walks of life. No mention of crazy games and silly fun, although, again acceptable as complements to this youth ministry program.

Kent Carlson and Mike Lueken also are insightful in their admonition to turn from the temptation to create bigger and better youth ministries and concentrate on helping the discipleship process. Christ followers should eventually get to the point where they see themselves as apprentices walking in the footsteps of a wise leader. The irony of this is that as youth ministers turn their focus to this (which is healthier and better), their youth programs almost always just naturally grow. People are attracted to good, healthy, strong ministries where there is love and a deep commitment to Jesus. The ministry at Suntree United Methodist Church

has experienced this. When the move was made away from a primarily “outreach” philosophy (e.g. fun and games, craziness, entertainment) to an in-reach, discipleship, and missions/service philosophy, the number of students attending increased. This is seemingly counterintuitive, but that’s what happened. It is apparent that today’s emerging generation is drawn to a deeper way of doing youth ministry.

Jim Belcher’s entire book, *Deep Church*, could have just as easily been called “Deep Youth Ministry.” Not everything is perfectly transferable, but the overall emphasis of the book is highly applicable. The point of the book is to examine and evaluate how a church is being run, and to make sure that it has not lost its true purpose and calling. Belcher addresses most of what that means and, again, that transfers to youth ministry. The youth minister and the program they oversee both need to embrace a deeper calling and a deeper commitment to that calling and to doing ministry in a deep way. The temptation is seemingly always there to move in a different direction. But a wise, intentional, and strongly committed person and ministry can resist that temptation and progress swiftly forward.

CHAPTER FOUR

PROJECT DESIGN

To gain a better and more complete understanding of what it means to develop a “deep youth ministry,” the following two initiatives were implemented: a personal, in-depth email discussion with a dozen youth ministry/discipleship “experts,” and an in-depth survey done among committed Christians of this emerging generation. In addition, a 90-minute seminar presentation was developed and presented at the National Youth Workers Convention in the fall of 2013, and will be addressed in chapter five of this thesis-project, “Outcomes and Conclusions.”

Youth Ministry Experts

Over the course of several months, one dozen men and women, who are recognized as “authorities” in the Christian discipleship and youth ministry fields, were contacted and asked to answer a single question: “What does it mean to have a deep youth ministry?” It was clear that all respondents took their answers seriously and provided thoughtful answers and suggestions. The length and depth of many of their answers were impressive. Clearly, a great deal of thought and time was taken to make sure that their responses were efficacious and given with integrity.

In order to be a part of this elite “youth ministry expert” field, the men and women contacted had to meet the following criteria,

- Be clearly recognized by others as authorities in the youth ministry and/or Christian discipleship world.
- Have spent numerous years in full-time youth ministry and/or discipleship ministry work.
- Be personally known by this author.

All 12 respondents were quick to reply and lend a helping hand. It was almost overwhelming to receive their responses and embrace the amount of knowledge and wisdom that it produced.

The following gives a quick glimpse regarding each of the twelve ministry experts. A fuller, more complete description of each person's answer to the question, and his or her ideas and suggestions, will be more fully scrutinized in chapter five.

Tony Campolo

Tony Campolo's introduction on his personal website page reads, "Welcome to the internet home of Dr. Anthony Campolo, speaker, author, sociologist, pastor, social activist and passionate follower of Jesus!"¹ What a great introduction to this man! In the world of Christianity, there is not much that Campolo has not done. He has traveled the world as an ambassador for Jesus Christ and is well-known as an author, preacher, teacher, speaker, and more. He is also professor emeritus of sociology at Eastern University, founder and president of the Evangelical Association for the Promotion of Education, and author of over 35 books. In addition, he is a sociologist, a Baptist minister, an evangelist, and host of his own TV Show titled *Red Letter Christians*.² Campolo speaks all over the world at conferences, churches, conventions, universities, etc. There is little about the subject of youth ministry or discipleship that he has not at least approached. It was an honor and privilege to have him participate in this project.

1. Tony Campolo, accessed November 4, 2018, <http://tonycampolo.org>.

2. Tony Campolo, "About Tony," accessed November 4, 2018, <http://tonycampolo.org/about-tony/>.

Jim Burns

Jim Burns is truly one of the great experts in the youth ministry world. He is the Executive Director of the HomeWord Center for Youth and Family at Azusa Pacific University in Southern California and “has over 1.5 million resources in print in over 25 languages.”³ Burns holds a PhD and is the host of his own radio broadcast titled “HomeWord with Jim Burns” which is heard daily in over eight hundred communities.⁴ In addition to his speaking and writing, Burns conducts numerous seminars around the world. These seminars include “Understanding Your Teenager,” “Confident Parenting,” “Creating an Intimate Marriage,” “Teaching Your Children Healthy Sexuality,” “Generation 2 Generation,” and “Building Healthy Morals and Values.”⁵ The seminar team is made up of 20 more youth ministry presenters, one of which is the author of this thesis-project!

Chap Clark

Chap Clark is also a veteran youth ministry authority in the field. He has authored numerous books and is currently the Pastor and Head of Staff at St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church in Newport Beach, California.⁶ Clark was also the director of the Student Leadership

3. “Jim Burns,” HomeWord: Azusa Pacific University, accessed November 4, 2018, <https://homeword.com/about/jim-burns/>.

4. “Jim Burns,” amazon.com, accessed November 4, 2018, http://www.amazon.com/Jim-Burns/e/B001ILFO10/ref=sr_ntt_srch_lnk_1?qid=1465261464&sr=8-1.

5. “Seminar List,” HomeWord: Azusa Pacific University accessed November 4, 2018, <https://homeword.com/seminars/seminar-list/>.

6. Chapman ‘Chap’ Clark,” St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, accessed December, 2018, <http://sapres.org>.

Project at Fuller Seminary.⁷ In addition, he is a well-known and sought-after speaker and conference presenter.

Kara Powell

Kara Powell is a youth ministry expert who has been involved in youth ministry for over 20 years. She is the Executive Director of the Fuller Youth Institute and an Advisor to Youth Specialties. Powell was named one of the “50 Women to Watch” by *Christianity Today* magazine. In addition, she is the author of a number of books including, perhaps her best-known book, *Sticky Faith*.⁸

Les Christie

Another true youth ministry expert, Les Christie, former chair and professor of the youth ministry department at William Jessup University, a Christian faith-based university in Northern California. Christie has written 22 books, published 150 national magazine articles, and leads various parenting seminars all over the country and the world.⁹ Christie is also a well-known and sought-after speaker and conference presenter.

7. “About Chap,” Chap Clark, accessed November 4, 2018, <http://www.chapclark.com/about-chap/>.

8. “Kara Eckmann Powell, PhD,” What Is Sticky Faith?, accessed June 6, 2016, <http://fulleryouthinstitute.org>

9. “Les Christie,” William Jessup University, <http://www.jessup.edu/>,” accessed December, 2018.

Steve Gerali

Steve Gerali was emphatic and passionate with his three-page answer to the presenting question. It is clear with only a cursory look at his website that this is the type of person he is.

The following excerpt substantiates this about Gerali,

Dr. Steven Gerali is a speaker, author, professor, clinical counselor, consultant and mentor who is recognized around the world as an expert in the field of adolescence, mentoring and youth ministry. Over the years Steve has demonstrated his passion for Jesus Christ by challenging teenagers and those who touch the lives of teenagers to find wholeness, fulfillment and a deeper relationship in Jesus Christ.¹⁰

James Bryan Smith

James Bryan Smith is the Executive Director of the Apprentice Institute, a theology professor at Friends University, and the author of eight books. A substantial part of the Apprentice Institute is the “Apprentice Experience,” an 18-month program designed to help usher Christians into a deeper, more fulfilling relationship with Jesus Christ. According to Smith, the Apprentice Series aims to “help Christians develop a robust discipleship by helping them understand who God is, what it means to be a Christian and what it means to live in community as a part of God’s kingdom.”¹¹ Smith’s books include *The Good and Beautiful God*, *The Good and Beautiful Life*, and *The Good and Beautiful Community*.

Jonathan McKee

Jonathan McKee is another outstanding authority in the youth ministry world. He is the president and founder of an online, web-based ministry titled “The Source for Youth Ministry.”

10. Steve Gerali, “Welcome,” accessed November 4, 2018, <https://stevegerali.wordpress.com>.

11. “Apprentice Experience: A Journey in Discipleship,” Apprentice Institute for Christian Spiritual Formation, accessed November 4, 2018, https://apprenticeinstitute.org/apprentice_experience/.

He is also the author of numerous youth ministry books, a speaker and trainer at seminars and workshops at churches and conferences all over America, and the author of his own blog.¹² His youth ministry-based website is a gold mine of relevant information, ideas, suggestions, and more for anyone involved with youth and/or the church. McKee's parenting seminar titled "Helping Parents Raise the Smart Phone Generation" is wildly successful and popular throughout the United States.

Hayne Steen

Hayne Steen is a marriage and family therapist and serves full time in youth ministry with Young Life and is on staff at Signal Mountain Presbyterian Church.¹³ In addition, Steen provides a large variety of training and parenting seminars, 17 seminars in all. Steen has been serving the Kingdom of God as a youth minister for over 20 years.

Dave Rahn

Dave Rahn is a "youth ministry researcher, author, futurist and missional leadership strategist."¹⁴ Truly a veteran leader in youth ministry, Rahn has served on the staff of Youth for Christ and Huntington University for over four decades. Rahn is also a prolific writer and has released over 100 articles, essays and books. His latest book, *Symmetry: Fixing Broken Patterns for Kids in Crisis*, just became available as a download. Rahn is also involved in a variety of

12. "Jonathan McKee – The Short Version," The Source for Youth Ministry, accessed November 4, 2018, <http://www.thesource4ym.com/about/>.

13. "Hayne Steen, M.A., LMHC," Elbow Tree, accessed November 4, 2018, <https://www.elbowtreeflorida.com/hayne-steen.html>

14. "David Rahn," Huntington University, accessed November 4, 2018, <https://www.huntington.edu/human-resources/personnel-directory/david-rahn>.

research projects related to how students can be powerful influences in a peer-to-peer relationship, particularly in matters of faith. Rahn is also the founding member of the Association of Youth Ministry Educators.

John Carroll

John Carroll is on staff at Friends University in Wichita, Kansas (a small, Christian university) and organizes, coordinates, and oversees a “certification experience in Christian Spiritual Formation for clergy and laity.”¹⁵ He’s an outstanding presenter, speaking at conferences and workshops all over the country on the subject of becoming and living out a life of Christian “apprenticeship” (follower or disciple). Carroll also has a Masters of Divinity from Asbury Theological Seminary and volunteers in the youth ministry department at Chapel Hill United Methodist Church, Wichita, Kansas.

Noel Becchetti

After serving for 12 years at Youth Specialties and 13 years as the President of the Center for Student Missions, Becchetti is now the Vice President for Leader Development for Asian Access Ministries.¹⁶ The Center for Student Missions is an outstanding inner-city missions organization that hosts church youth programs for up to a week in inner-city environments. Suntree United Methodist Church’s youth program has served with CSM in Philadelphia, Nashville, Washington D.C., and Chicago. The author of this thesis-project has also taken

15. “About Us,” Apprentice Institute for Christian Spiritual Formation, accessed November 4, 2018, https://apprenticeinstitute.org/about_us/.

16. “Bio: Noel & Kyle Becchetti,” Asian Access, accessed November 4, 2018, <http://asianaccess.org/becchetti>.

students to CSM programs in Los Angeles, California on several occasions. The impact and significance those experiences had on students was profound.

Survey of Committed Christian Young People

It is great to have youth ministry experts from all over the country give their thoughtful feedback on the “ins and outs” of developing a deeper youth ministry. But perhaps more important are the thoughts, opinions, ideas, and comments from deeply committed Christian young people. This is exactly what happened when a large sampling of students participated in our “Deeper Youth Ministry Survey.” The following information is the result of that survey.

Objectives

1. To gain a complete understanding, from the perspective of a young person, what it is that enables them to grow closer to Jesus and deeper in their faith.
2. To discover 6-10 “markers” that helped these students in their faith journeys to develop a more mature faith.
3. To discover if there were any regular practices that propelled these students deeper in their faith.
4. To begin to craft a ministry program that included pertinent information gleaned from this survey to have immediate use in Suntree United Methodist Church’s youth ministry.

Survey Design and Parameters

Students who were deemed “mature and deeply committed Christian students” by their current and/or former youth minister were contacted and surveyed to collect qualitative data. The participating students consider themselves to be “disciples of Jesus” and have a “growing, deepening relationship with Christ.” The youth ministers were all contacted by, and have a personal relationship with, the author of this thesis-project. Many of these students were

contacted via email, but all were personally invited and given instructions by a caring, Christian minister. Most of the students who were surveyed had graduated from their high school youth programs and were participating in college or post-college ministries. A total of 50 students from ten individual youth ministries participated in the sampling.

Through prayer, pondering, and talking through this survey with numerous youth ministry associates, the following five questions were created. These questions aim to get to the very foundation of adolescent growth and personal discipleship,

1. What would you say is the **ONE THING** that has helped you to grow the most as a Christian?
2. What does it mean to grow deeper as a Christian?
3. What would help you to grow more as a Christian?
4. As a Christian, what do you have a “great passion” for?
5. Is there one thing in your life as a Christian that most people believe should be really helpful for you, but in actuality has not been very helpful at all? If yes, what is that?

In addition, students were asked to rank the following 19 characteristics or aspects of a typical church/youth ministry program in terms of **MOST** helpful to **LEAST** helpful. These 19 characteristics were developed after surveying and studying various “typical” youth ministry programs. These emerged as the most typical and often incorporated aspect. They were listed as such and in no particular order,

1. A Bible study
2. My small group
3. My youth pastor
4. Caring Christian adult
5. Sermon/message
6. Sunday school
7. Sunday morning church
8. Youth group gathering
9. Curriculum
10. Camp/retreat
11. Service project
12. Worshipping
13. Solitude and/or quiet

14. Mission trip
15. My parent(s)
16. My friends
17. Journaling
18. Christian concert
19. Personal devotions
20. Other (_____)

Survey Collection and Tabulation

To acquire a broad perspective and sampling of students to participate in this survey, numerous youth ministry professionals were contacted via email, phone call, and personal relationship. Each ministry professional was asked to personally select one or more qualified students to participate in the survey. Once these students were selected, they were all contacted by the author and given the survey via email and an accompanying consent form. This consent form laid out the guidelines and parameters of the survey including the nature and purpose of the survey, participant confidentiality, welfare, rights and individual privacy.

CHAPTER FIVE

OUTCOMES AND CONCLUSIONS

How is the spiritual depth of a youth ministry measured? Is it through attendance? Certainly, a strong, healthy youth program will attract more students.¹ Young people who enjoy being a part of a regular large-group gathering will almost invariably invite their friends. At the same time, an all-you-can-eat BBQ party will consistently do the same thing! Then is it through something like a large summer camping program? Suntree United Methodist Church, at one point in its history, would take up to seven busloads of kids to its annual summer camp—as many as 235 students one year. And yet, often as many as 100+ of those students attending one of those summer camps never returned to the youth program and were never seen again (at least not at the church!). Is it the number of Confirmands? Sunday school classes? Even confessions of faith? Again, it's a tough entity to measure or quantify.

But it does not mean that it cannot be done. It has been the contention of this thesis-project that an understanding of what a deep youth ministry truly is and what a shallow, or superficial, youth ministry looks like, is possible. It behooves the church and the youth minister and youth program to cultivate an atmosphere, or culture, that allows deeper ministry to happen. Without that, churches are doomed to superficiality.² In his

1. Whitney Hopler, "16 Ways to Build a Youth Ministry That Will Last," *Crosswalk*, February 3, 2009, accessed November 4, 2018, <http://www.crosswalk.com/church/pastors-or-leadership/16-ways-to-build-a-youth-ministry-that-will-last-11599048.html>.

2. Jordan White, "What Is Discipleship and Why Is It Important?" *Revolution Church*, April 2, 2015, accessed November 4, 2018, <http://revolution.church/sermon/what-is-discipleship-why-is-it-important/>.

book, *Engaging the Soul of Youth Culture: Bridging Teen Worldviews and Christian Faith*, Walt Mueller describes the culture in which deeper youth ministry can thrive,

Always evaluate (and where necessary abandon) methods. “That’s the way we’ve always done it.” “It’s worked well for so long.” These clichés can’t justify using tired, outmoded ministry methods. While the content of the Word always remains unchanged, the way we do ministry should be constantly evaluated. There is no room for sacred cows. If the message isn’t getting through because of dated methods, new ones should be prayerfully sought and adopted in order to effectively communicate the good news. However, we must adopt only those methods that are faithful to the unchanging Word. If a methodology compromises the Word, then it’s not an option. And, we must never assume that methodologies can do what only relationship can.³

Mueller drives home a great point. Youth ministries (and churches alike) must be about the business of evaluating programs and ministries to make sure that they are moving toward the desired goal of developing deeply devoted Christ followers. It seems to be easy for churches to drift toward the busyness of “doing” religious activities, and to forget the importance of “developing” deeper disciples. This concern is addressed by Kent Carlson and Mike Lueken in their book *Renovation of the Church: What Happens When a Seeker Church Discovers Spiritual Formation*. Carlson and Lueken add, “The clear call is to make disciples of Jesus who are immersed in a new, Trinitarian reality. Disciples are students. They are apprentices of a skillful master. ... It slowly began to dawn on us that our method of attracting people was forming them in ways contrary to the way of Christ.”⁴

3. Walt Mueller, *Engaging the Soul of Youth Culture: Bridging Teen Worldviews and Christian Truth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 187.

4. Kent Carlson and Mike Lueken, *Renovation of the Church: What Happens When A Seeker Church Discovers Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 55.

Outcomes and Conclusions

In determining the effectiveness of the two projects presented in the fourth chapter of this thesis-project, it will be helpful to remember what they were: first, to glean information from a seasoned group of twelve youth ministry and discipleship “experts,” and second, to survey a large sampling of deeply committed young people who are a part of this emerging generation to see what they articulate as important in their own, personal, deeper spiritual journey. These two projects will be evaluated and then conclusions will be drawn from the group as a whole.

Twelve Youth Ministry and Discipleship Experts

Tony Campolo

In essence, Campolo’s answer to the question was this: those who claim to be Christ followers ought to study and have a deep understanding of the words of Jesus. In an email message to the author, dated October 15, 2011, Campolo states “Becoming red letter Christians would be a major step in the right direction in fostering discipleship among teenagers and older youth.”

The bible is full of admonitions to do as Campolo has suggested. In the Gospel according to John, Jesus is quoted as saying, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). In order to have a Christocentric youth ministry that is deep and helps develop true disciples of Jesus, it must know Jesus, “hear” the voice of Jesus, and learn to follow him. Prior to writing this, John added this quote from Jesus, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). The essence of a deeper youth ministry, and the deeper

discipleship of the Christian faith, is walking in the light that comes from being a Christ follower and avoiding the pitfalls of walking in the dark.

Jim Burns

Jim Burns offered four solid recommendations in his answer to the “deep ministry” question. In an email to the author, dated August 12, 2011, Burns submitting the following,

- Continue to give kids opportunities to experience mission and service.
- Challenge kids to spend time with God. Personal time with God gives kids a chance to practice God-honoring spiritual disciplines.
- Give kids lots of practical help in the area of practicing purity.
- Youth ministers must also partner with parents of the kids in the youth group to help them develop having faith conversations at home.

These suggestions are all outstanding. The youth ministry at Suntree United Methodist Church has worked overtime to attempt to implement these into its existing youth ministry program. Each summer three mission trips are taken; one outside the borders of this country and two inside. Also, a local “missions week” was begun several years ago to serve and minister to the surrounding community.

To help create a desire within the lives of young people to spend more time with God, the subject of personal discipleship is targeted often and numerous resources are provided. It is not unusual for students to go home after a youth ministry night with a book or program to enhance what they are doing with their own spiritual endeavors.

Each year, the youth program conducts a “Human Sexuality and the Christian Faith” seminar for students. This seminar is either given over a two-day, six-hour

workshop, or conducted over a six-week, one hour per week program. Attendance is always strong and the subject is tackled aggressively.

And finally, the subject of “partnering with parents” is also targeted with enthusiasm and zeal. Throughout the year, numerous classes, programs, and partnering opportunities are presented to the parents of the youth. Engagement by the parents is generally strong and encouraging.

These components will undoubtedly help the current youth ministry at Suntree United Methodist Church, and certainly any youth program, to develop deep-seated disciples of Jesus.

Chap Clark

Clark provided an extensive, six-page answer to the question. In essence, Clark says that the very core of being a disciple is found in trusting Jesus. In his email correspondence with the author, dated August 12, 2011, Clark writes, “Discipleship, or following Jesus, is quite straightforward: It is God’s job to change us into obedient, ‘holy’ servants, and our job to sincerely trust him enough to respond as he leads us.” Clark continues by conveying that our task is not merely “loving” as the true mark of a Christian disciple, but love that is developed, nurtured and “driven” by trusting Jesus Christ “as my everything.”

In terms of the role of the local youth minister and/or youth ministry team, Clark adds that our responsibility to disciple students is found in teaching them to understand what it means to trust Jesus. We are to trust Jesus with “our time, heart, and energies.” In Clark’s email to the author, he wrapped up his answer with the following,

When a kid is struggling with self-image, or addiction, or racism, the question, and the only question, we have to offer is, what does it mean to trust Jesus with that? How can we hear his voice, know his perspective, see this through his eyes? He sees us, he knows us. It is his love we receive and embrace, his mercy we lean on, and his guidance we trust. That's discipleship.

Clark continues to confirm the need for a youth ministry that is centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ. He does not make a long list of "bullet points" that every youth ministry should follow, rather he clearly advocates the need for a ministry program that teaches and encourages young people to trust Jesus.

Kara Powell

Powell offered three very helpful insights in answering this question. First, she insisted that the youth minister do all he or she can do to connect and engage with parents. Her observation and experience (she noted that she did not do this well in her early youth ministry years) was that this does not happen very well or often in the local church. In fact, she noted that most parents do not connect well with the paid staff nor with the volunteer leaders in the ministry. Intentionally creating a way for this type of connection to happen is very important to her. In an email reply to the author, dated August 23, 2011, Powell wrote, "Parents are the most influential influence in kids' lives!"

Second, Powell admonished that the students of a given youth ministry be encouraged and taught to connect better and deeper with the overall church body. Too often, she insisted, students are active in their particular youth programs, but not with the intergenerational church. This is a mistake many youth directors make. Developing a program and a narrative that attempts to overcome this is vital.

In her third suggestion, Powell moved from the practical to the theological. She made the intriguing suggestion that kids must be taught to think at a much deeper level, that they not be given “spoon fed” answers and, that they are engaged in true, deep, spiritual conversations. Often the students at a normal youth group night are given a silly “Bible crossword” puzzle to figure out, or a trite “object lesson” as a means of teaching them the truths of Christianity. Powell’s assertion that ministries must endeavor to go further and deeper rings true. It is the belief of Suntree United Methodist Church’s youth ministry team that this is not only important and an absolute necessity, but young people actually crave it! In Romans, Paul writes, “They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them” (Romans 2:15). Our hearts, minds, and consciences all bear witness that we are children of God and we naturally want to be closer to our Father in heaven.

Les Christie

Christie was pithy in his email reply to the author, dated August 12, 2011, giving five short, albeit powerful, bullet points,

1. Teach kids to read the Bible at a deep level, and “stop the skimming!”
2. Challenge them to greatness.
3. Don’t talk down to them.
4. Lead by example.
5. Love on your students.

Young people live in a culture where they truly are being taught to skim. Lost are the days when a young person curls up with a good book and dives deeply into its

content. Tim Challies addresses this in his book *The Next Story*.⁵ In large part because of social networking and web page blogs, young people are skimming the content of most of what they read. This is transferred to the reading of God's Word. Christie's contention is that young people need to be taught to understand the importance of reading the bible and regain the process of thoroughly taking in the material. This bible reading is not primarily for information, but rather for transformation. Instead, most kids have learned to skim and this gets transferred to their understanding of the bible.

"Challenge kids to greatness" is another gold nugget of instruction. It has been the contention of this author that the students involved at Suntree United Methodist Church often seem insecure and almost timid in their approach to living out the truths of the Gospel. They do not seem to see themselves as leaders or "Christian heroes," but rather as incapable neophytes barely capable of making a difference. Instead of "standing tall" and having a "can do" attitude, they are, for lack of a better phrase, "living in fear." This must change! Young people today are to be taught to be courageous, strong, and capable of defending their faith. Students involved in youth ministry should, at some point, begin to conjure up the gumption to be strong advocates for Christ and the Gospel.

Any youth ministry program would do well to incorporate all of Christie's suggestions. Loving kids, listening to them, and leading them through and by the example of our own transparent lives, should permeate our programs. As this is done in local churches, lives will be changed and young people will finally be seen as bold, courageous, and powerful Christian young people.

5. Tim Challies, *The Next Story: Life and Faith after the Digital Explosion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan).

Steve Gerali

In his email reply to the “deeper youth ministry question” received by the author on August 22, 2011, Gerali proposed that a deep and effective youth ministry is made up of four characteristics. Gerali was substantial in his replay. The follow contains the primary essence of his response. First, a youth ministry must nurture a deep and richer love to, for, and with its students. And then, the leaders of this ministry must “live into that!” He cites Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount as the foundational scriptural reference for this.

Second, Gerali says we must teach our students the efficacy of “goodness.” In his perspective (and he’s undoubtedly correct in this), very few ministries teach their students to be good. They are certainly taught to avoid “being bad,” but not so much taught, with intention, to be good. Gerali references Paul’s encouragement to the Christians in Ephesus by noting that we were “made for good works!” Paul writes, “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10).

Third, Gerali contends that we must seek after wisdom as is found in Proverbs. Again, this is a characteristic that most youth ministries do not have. This wisdom should be both “situational” (calling on God’s help) and a developed “characteristic” of a Christ follower. Are youth programs teaching their students to seek after that? If so, those ministries are on their way to developing deeper Christians.

And finally, Gerali recommends that youth ministers cultivate within their ministries and within the minds of their young people the understanding of what it means to be free. Students need to overcome fear and thereby grow deeper in their faith. Gerali

says that “Satan will try to stomp out our freedom,” but Christians are to be ever persistent in combating him. Fear is the deterrent to freedom.

Gerali makes several deep, and unique, observations. Teaching young people to seek after wisdom, to be immersed and to live into the freedom found in Jesus, and to strive for goodness and good behaviors all while being wrapped in an all-encompassing love certainly will guide them toward a deeper faith.

James Bryan Smith

Smith had three worthy points to the deeper discipleship question. In his email response received by the author on February 5, 2016, Smith submitted the following along with a brief explanation,

1. Be intentional about Jesus’ commission to make disciples.
2. Baptize them in a Trinitarian Reality.
3. Teach students to do what Jesus taught them to do.

Smith points out that the reputation that many youth ministries have is often quite the opposite of what is listed here. Youth programs major on a more superficial approach to programming for students oftentimes with the intention of enhancing attendance numbers to keep a senior pastor or supervisor happy. Jesus never said, “Go forth and build up the number of kids in your youth program!” But he did tell his followers to “make disciples” (Matthew 28:19). Smith’s point is well taken here. Youth ministries should strive for the grander goal of discipleship and be less concerned about the superficialities that accompany most programs.

In the email correspondence, Smith also added that we ought to guide kids to eliminate the things Jesus taught his followers to eliminate (such as anger, lying, greed,

lust, envy, etc.) and replace them with the characteristics that are more in line with Christlikeness.

Jonathan McKee

McKee's answer to the question was unique and intriguing, if not a bit perplexing. First, as a prolific blog writer and web poster, McKee chose to use this question and his subsequent answer in one of his latest blog posts.⁶ He challenged his readers with the same question and then expounded with his free thinking while answering the question. The challenge was for his followers and readers to respond to the question and then to take the same question to their students. Second, he focused in on the two words "deep" and "true" almost wondering if these words were even necessary. And, according to McKee, they certainly were not in Jesus' time. In his email response to the author, dated August 23, 2011, McKee then cited Luke's words regarding discipleship: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it" (Luke 9:23-24). Continuing in his email to the author, McKee added, "Jesus' definition of disciple and his example of leadership didn't require words like 'deep' and 'true.' They just were. His call to discipleship was deep. His commitment to servant leadership was true. His actions were all the 'deep' and 'true' we needed to hear." McKee acknowledged that being a disciple and a deep Christian was not an easy thing to teach or do. At the same time, his admonition was for youth ministers to raise that bar high and boldly communicate that to their students. In some ways it's the great paradox of the

6. Jonathon McKee, "Deeper Ministries ... True Disciples." Life in Student Ministry, August 24, 2011, accessed December 18, 2018, <http://www.studentministry.org/deeper-ministries-true-disciples/>.

Christian faith. Coming to know Jesus and developing a relationship with him is actually quite easy and simple; you merely have to receive the free gift of grace. At the same time, it's impossible. Christ followers are to be perfect as God the Father in heaven is perfect, they are to deny themselves, and walk in a manner worthy of Jesus. McKee concluded his email response to the author by asking the poignant question: "What about you? What do you think youth ministries should be doing to develop deeper, true disciples of Jesus Christ?" Certainly his response is one deeper youth ministries should contemplate. A large part of the discipleship process is tackling the question and the topic head on and having better, deeper, more open discussions with our students.

Hayne Steen

Steen gave one of the more robust answers to the question. A deep thinker himself, and an obviously committed Christian, Steen presented the following eight bullet points in his email response, dated August 11, 2011, to the author's "deep ministry" question,

- God's greatness is continually put on display front and center.
- Youth leaders are personally spending extended time alone with God (seeing and savoring him in his Word and his world).
- Students are consistently taught how to read the scriptures for themselves and are taught how to pray boldly.
- Students and leaders are both actively committed to sharing God's greatness with the next generation (locally and abroad).
- Humor and vulnerability are both celebrated.
- Forgiveness is an action word.

- Parents are being actively disciplined. This one is of critical importance when the ministry setting is appropriate for this to be an active ongoing reality.
- The youth minister is not the only adult influencing depth but there is a growing community of adults whose lives are a working definition of depth regardless of circumstance and most often because of it.

Certainly, any ministry that encompasses these qualities will undoubtedly be moving toward depth and discipleship. Steen lays a great foundation and is compelling in his reasoning for these. At Suntree United Methodist Church the youth ministry team is devoted to doing their best to address each of these points. God is the very focus of the ministry, parents are continually invited to be engaged and participate, the scriptures are not only read, but are unpacked and digested, there is a large group of committed adult leaders (and student leaders) who meet regularly in community, and forgiveness, love, and fun are all a vital part of what happens. As a result of this combination of qualities, there are many students involved in the program and it spawns a great deal of enjoyment and engagement. As a result, the students are more prepared and eager to move deeper in their faith. Because of the adult leadership and the love, forgiveness, and acceptance that is evident, students do not see the Christian life as a burden, but rather one that is to be pursued and nurtured.

Dave Rahn

This question of taking students deeper was not one that caught Rahn off guard. His passionate reply and even personal reflection revealed his heart and mind on this subject. And clearly, he is a man who wrestles with this subject and has dedicated his life to pursuing the right answer to it. In an email message to the author, dated August 27,

2011, Rahn states, “This is a soapbox I am living on with my Youth for Christ Family.”

And then with that he delivered his personal reflection questions, which are associated with his and Youth for Christ’s “Five Essentials” for ministry,⁷

1. What personal prayer life do I need to cultivate so that the Christ-sharing relationships we have with lost kids through our ministry sites are saturated in prayer?
2. Do those who know me best experience my love for people as generous and indiscriminate, ensuring that we take seriously the obligation to pursue loving relationships with lost kids through our ministry sites?
3. Do my own rhythms of obedience to God’s word predict that the kids in our ministry sites will experience a regular diet of coaching them toward faithful living and responsiveness to God based on well-taught, well-modeled biblical truth?
4. Is unity in the body of Christ reflected in my life’s schedule as a first priority so that the kids in our community’s ministry sites witness our desire to glorify God together as more important than our particular organization’s success?
5. Have I navigated the traps of fear and pride so that I can lead with the confident humility of a servant of Jesus, empowering kids and adults in our ministry sites to step into their fullest potential as contributors to the Kingdom of God?

The gist of these five points is really directed to the person of the youth minister (and to his or her team of adult leaders). Youth ministers cannot take their students to a depth that they do not regularly swim in. The heart of the question is not so much a question of knowledge or skills deficiencies. It is more so a question/challenge for youth ministers to value their own personal journeys with Jesus deep enough to forsake all else and cultivate a richer, deeper, inner life. Until that happens, they are not going to be effective in leading kids to that point. In his email response, Rahn added that we need to

7. Youth For Christ, “YFC’s Essentials for Fruitful and Sustainable Ministry,” 2018, accessed December 18, 2018, http://www.yfc.net/about/five_essentials/.

simplify and focus. “Life is washing us out with its pace and complexity. Kids do not know anything different than relentless stimuli, fast pace and constant noise.” This is absolutely true. And often it is true among the leadership team. Rahn is accurate in saying that until youth ministers are able to develop the deeper discipleship life themselves, their students will mostly likely never get there.

John Carroll

Carroll was to the point in his email answer written to the author on February 5, 2016. In the email, Carroll proposed the following three initiatives. A deep youth ministry is one that helps teenagers...

1. Cultivate healthy narratives about God and a deeper understanding of the Kingdom of God.
2. To put on the character of Christ in the midst of a post-Christian world.
3. To develop strong, healthy relationships with peers and adults.

Carroll once again reiterated the need to focus in on the person of God (through Christ), to live as Jesus instructs us to live, and to make sure there is a strong group of committed, healthy adults who are helping students navigate the waters. Youth ministries that can make this happen are sure to help grow deeper, stronger apprentices for Christ.

Noel Becchetti

Becchetti gave perhaps the most counterintuitive answer that was received. His suggestion was unique in that it was the only one of its kind, and it was a bit perplexing in that it seemed to be almost the opposite of what one might expect. In Becchetti's

email, received by the author on August 12, 2011, he writes: “You have to get your kids, and yourself, involved and active as full discipleship participants in ministry, regardless of where any kid's ‘spirituality’ might happen to be.” This is a fascinating perspective! Becchetti intimated that most youth ministries, and most churches, have an understood secret list of requirements before allowing students to delve into deeper ministry-related endeavors. And often that list includes such superficialities as popularity, good looks, and “talents” (like athletic ability, and others). Becchetti almost pleads that youth programs usher kids into discipleship and leadership roles as soon as they possibly can: “As soon as someone expresses the slightest interest in Jesus, they are to be invited to become full participants of the church movement, which includes worshipping, communion, participating in outreach and service to others, even planting additional churches – while they are continuing to walk their own spiritual journeys.”

In his book, *Deep and Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend*, Andy Stanley addresses nearly the same approach when he writes, “We put people into leadership roles too early, on purpose. We operate under the assumption that people learn on a need-to-know-basis. The sooner they discover what they don't know, the sooner they will be interested in learning what they need to know.”⁸ Again, this is a fascinating concept. Imagine youth ministries where students are thrust into leadership and discipleship roles before they're all polished up, prepped and ready! In his response to the author, Becchetti said it so well. “What it involves, which is a stretch for us here in the West, is to trust that God can be God enough to take care of Himself (in terms of revealing Himself to people and drawing them into a full relationship with Him) over

8. Andy Stanley, *Deep and Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 128.

time, without us having to check off certain benchmarks so that we can be assured that somebody ‘gets it.’”

Young people are hungry to step up in their faith journeys and be a part of the greater whole. Churches that relegate kids to glorified babysitting on Sunday mornings and keep them uninvolved at the church’s worship service except for “special occasions” squash any chances of young people developing and experiencing deeper faith. Getting them active early is one bona fide way to make sure that does not happen!

Survey of Committed Christian Young People

The results of this inquiry were eye opening. The first five questions yielded a variety of answers while homing in on a few consistent responses.

Question one, “What would you say is the **ONE THING** that has helped you to grow the most as a Christian?” produced valuable responses. Many of the answers were personal and given only once. Some of these included, “Worshipping with my hands in the air,” “Reading the scriptures and fellowship,” and “The more my faith is tested, the more it strengthens.” But a pattern did begin to emerge. There were three responses that began to be the most offered and all three of these responses were tied together with one common thread: relationships.

Twenty-four percent of the students surveyed said that their youth minister and youth ministry were powerful ingredients helping them to grow deeper as Christians. It was very apparent that being in a safe and accepting environment was very important to the respondents. A second-year college student wrote, “The one thing that has allowed me to grow more is the acceptance by my youth pastor and youth group. They’ve allowed

me to be myself and just overflow with Christ.” These are great words that any youth minister would love to hear. And the message is clear: an encouraging youth minister and youth group go a long way toward helping young people develop spiritual depth.

Twenty-eight percent of respondents indicated that a caring, loving, Christian adult mentor/leader was responsible in large part for their growth as young Christians. And although it may seem like that is not a really significant number, that sentiment was found throughout the survey results in a variety of different ways. One 24-year-old woman wrote, “Having strong, confident, Christian elders in my life has helped me to grow the most. Whether it was in a small group or in a large group, I have had incredible leaders and mentors to help me grow.”

Thirty-four percent of the students surveyed said that attending church was one of the leading components that helped them to grow as a Christian. One student wrote, “The community of Christians I am surrounded by in my church, and choose to surround myself with, has been something that is really important to me since I was a child.” It seems we often revert to an “old-school” approach to youth ministry thinking that, as long as kids are involved in the program, church is not so important. These students indicated otherwise. This has been seen firsthand at Suntree United Methodist Church, completely re-creating the Sunday morning experience. Sunday morning church has been redesigned so that it can be positively and eagerly attended by adults and students alike, both able to enter into worship, prayer, self-reflection, confession, communion, and more, to have a decidedly complete and deeper experience.

Question two, “What does it mean to grow deeper as a Christian?” garnered a variety of answers. But those answers were almost entirely found under one of three

categories: trusting God through Jesus more and getting closer to him, learning more and more through the studying of the scriptures, and growing in loving relationships with God, others, and self. Five students (10%) mentioned loving God and falling more in love with Jesus as a primary building block for growing deeper in their faith. Nineteen students (38%) responded by asserting that learning the scriptures, Christian theology, and being actively involved in Bible study classes was an integral part of spiritual maturity. And then 24 students (48%) responded with a more emotional component by saying that growing closer to Jesus and God, denying themselves, falling more in love with God, and having a true desire and/or yearning for closeness with him, were all most important. Altogether, 96% of the students surveyed all answered in one of these three areas.

The third question, “What would help you to grow more as a Christian?” also prompted a variety of responses. Some of the answers centered on “doing.” Things like mission trips, service projects, not hanging out with the wrong people, and retreats were all mentioned as tools that would help develop a deeper faith. But most of the students focused on one of two primary answers. First, respondents cited reading and understanding the bible as one of the chief ways to grow. Twenty-four percent said that in order to grow, studying God’s word was imperative. Second, a large group of students (42%) said that having the right relationships was paramount. One 19-year-old female put it this way: “To be surrounded by people who love God more than they love themselves. I think that’s been the hardest thing about college. I have yet to find friends that are consistent in their relationship with Jesus.” Another student wrote this: “The most

important thing for me to grow as a Christian is to have a support system/small group of people to do life with as Christians together.”

It is clear that this group of young people see the need to understand God’s word better, and to be in richer relationships to grow deeper in their relationship with Jesus. Nowhere did a student answer with “more games” or “funnier YouTube videos” or “better PowerPoint presentations.” Sometimes, youth ministries major on superfluous avenues with which to teach students (and oftentimes they are very effective), but helping young people understand God’s word better and ensuring that they are in relationships that will inspire and encourage them seems to be what these young people are needing.

The fourth question aimed at getting the students to be a little more introspective: “As a Christian, what do you have a great passion for?” The hope in asking this question was to get a glimpse into what committed Christian young people love and are enthusiastic about. Perhaps understanding their passions would help us to understand if there is a link between growing deeper and living out that zeal. That might be a leap, but there may be a connection. Certainly, if a person is passionate about an aspect of the Christian life, what is it that fuels and/or feeds that? The answer probably drives that person into a deeper faith relationship with God.

This question resulted in the most variety of answers, but two clear answers began to emerge. First, 20% of the students responded using the word “love” in a plethora of ways, but mostly centered on loving their friends and other people. Fifty percent of the survey takers said their primary passion was in helping and/or serving others, especially those who cannot help themselves. A 21-year-old college student responded by saying, “I have a great passion for helping other people. I have always thrived on doing things for

other people and helping other people come to know Christ.” It was interesting to see so many selfless answers among a typically narcissistic age group. Youth ministries must take notice that young people have a great desire and passion to be in service and missions. This is clear! The youth ministry at Suntree United Methodist Church did a complete overhaul a few years ago by shifting from a “fun and games” methodology of ministry to doing a more “missional/service” approach to ministry. The results have been phenomenal. Currently, the church does three concurrent mission trips (one international and two domestic) annually with approximately 80 students and parents involved. Then, later in the summer, the youth program does a “local mission week” serving up to 25 mission and Christian organizations in their community with over 200 students and adult volunteers. It’s quite an undertaking, but at the same time, the best thing that is done there all year.

The final question was, “Is there one thing in your life as a Christian that most people believe should be really helpful for you, but in actuality has not been very helpful at all? And if so, what would that be?” The intention of this question was to see if anything emerged that could help youth ministries eliminate programs that are in reality quite meaningless, at least to students. The majority of answers, 82%, were “no.” Most students were not able to name something that supposedly helped them grow deeper but was in reality not doing that. But a variety of students did offer answers that may help youth programs with their ministries. The following is a list of those answers,

1. People who stand on street corners yelling at people to love Jesus
2. Praying alone
3. Trying to “read the bible in a year,” or “from start to finish”
4. Journaling
5. Sermons
6. Going to church just to check it off your list

7. Quiet reflection and/or solitude
8. Having “Christian” parents who really aren’t very dedicated
9. Boring bible studies
10. Boring Sunday morning church services

The second half of the survey included the list of 19 characteristics or aspects of a typical church/youth ministry program. The students were asked to rank them in terms of *most* helpful to *least* helpful regarding their own personal spiritual development. In other words, which programs aided them in diving deeper as Christians, and which programs, for the most part, were not so helpful.

From *most* helpful to *least* helpful, the quantitative list, and the corresponding ranking (with “1” being *most* helpful and “19” being *least* helpful) are as follows,

1. My Youth Pastor	5.4 (Average score)
2. Mission Trip	6.4
3. My Small Group	7.6
4. Worshipping	7.8
5. Bible Study	7.9
6. Sermon/Message	8.2
7. My Friends	8.3
8. Caring Christian Adults	8.4
9. Camp/Retreat	8.6
10. My Parents	8.9
11. Sunday Morning Church	9.5
12. Youth Group Gathering	9.9
13. Service Projects	10.9
14. Solitude and/or Quiet	11.2
15. Personal Devotions	11.4
16. Sunday School	13.2
17. Christian Concert	14.2
18. Journaling	14.3
19. Curriculum	14.4
20. (Other)	

Students were also given a chance to add to this list. Only three students chose to do this. Their three responses were listed and all fell on the *least* helpful side of the continuum. They were,

1. Christian blogs and podcasts 20 (One student, 20 ranking)
2. My environment 18 (One student, 18 ranking)
3. Long sermons 20 (One student, 20 ranking)

What determines if something that is ranked “very helpful” is actually very helpful and conversely, what dictates that something ranked “least helpful” is indeed least helpful? This survey is at least a strong indication of those determinants. Students were able independently to rank those elements that they believed helped, or didn’t help, in forming their spiritual depth.

“Beyond Babysitting: Developing A Deeper Youth Ministry” Seminar

Seminar Introduction

In the fall of 2011, the “Beyond Babysitting: Developing A Deeper Youth Ministry” seminar was developed and presented to full-time and part-time youth ministers, youth workers, adult volunteer leaders, and students at Youth Specialties’ National Youth Workers Convention in San Diego, California. The goal of the presentation, and the hope of the presenter, was for those in attendance to leave upon completion and have a dynamic, practical, and reasonable way in which to move their current youth ministries toward deeper spiritual depth and discipleship. The seminar lasted one and half hours and consisted of a three-page outline and a 103-slide PowerPoint presentation.⁹

The scriptural basis of the seminar was gleaned from the New Testament book of Ephesians where Paul teaches his believing friends about Christian spiritual growth,

9. See Appendixes A and B for these materials.

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Ephesians 4:11-16)

After exegeting the previous scripture passage for the attending audience, and after having a compelling group discussion and consequently gaining a better understanding of Paul's encouragement to the Christians in Ephesus, the seminar then focused on three vital youth ministry areas.

Seminar Section One: You

After a brief discussion about youth ministry in general and how youth ministry has changed over the years, this first section began to focus on the person of the youth minister. In doing so, a challenge was given to each person in the room encouraging everyone to take a good look at himself or herself.

Dallas Willard, in *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ*, writes, "We can say, in a preliminary manner, that spiritual formation for the Christian basically refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself."¹⁰ How does this happen? Willard continues to admonish his readers by instructing them to understand three principles: Vision. Intention. Means.¹¹ Vision is a compelling perspective that an

10. Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 22.

11. For a deeper discussion of these three concepts, see Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 85-90.

individual, and only that individual, has regarding who they are and the person they want to be. Intention is the desire and passion to become that person. Finally, Means is the capability to carry out the Vision and the Intention. For the youth minister, it is the clear vision and the solid intention to obey Christ that will naturally lead to seeking out and applying the Means to that end.

Willard continues, “The clear call is to make disciples of Jesus who are immersed in a new, Trinitarian reality. Disciples are students. They are apprentices of a skillful master. Apprentices are learning to turn away from self and bring their kingdom into God’s Kingdom. They are learning to let him have say over their lives.”¹² This is true spiritual maturation. When Christians move from the superficial “religious” life of trying to overcome bad habits or attempting to create new good habits, to truly living as Christ calls them to live, they are moving more and more toward discipleship or apprenticeship. That is a move toward a deeper faith and youth minister must not only embody that, but be about the serious business of guiding the emerging generation under their care in the same direction.

Kent Carlson and Mike Lueken, authors of *Renovation of the Church: What Happens When a Seeker Church Discovers Spiritual Formation*, add, “As they restructure their lives around him, he gradually transforms their inner being in Christlikeness. They actually become more like him. They don’t obey him because they

12. Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 55.

have to or are trying hard; obedience flows out of the new heart God has fashioned within them.”¹³

At this point in the seminar, a healthy, formidable discussion ensued based on the following five questions,

1. Do you have a clear, compelling vision of yourself as a Christ follower?
2. Are you intentionally and passionately moving toward that vision?
3. Have you developed the means and spiritual disciplines in your life to become “mature and attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ?”
4. Are you obeying Christ, not out of guilt, obligation or duty, but rather out of the overflow of your heart?
5. Do you see yourself as an apprentice of Jesus?

And finally, the first section of the seminar was concluded with a list of suggestions for each attendee,

1. Fall in love with the Bible
2. Spend unhurried time in solitude and silence, cultivating intimacy with Jesus
3. “Read, read, and read!”
4. “Podcast, podcast, and podcast”
5. Get in a group that will sharpen you

Seminar Section Two: A Change in Youth Ministry

In 2010, Kenda Creasy Dean authored a widely read book entitled *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*.¹⁴ The book was based on hundreds of interviews of teenagers and research conducted over a nine-

13. Kent Carlson and Mike Lueken, *Renovation of the Church: What Happens When a Seeker Church Discovers Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 55.

14. Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 40.

year period by the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR).¹⁵ Through her interviews and a deeper study of the results of the NSYR findings, Dean concluded that about 75% of students claim to be “Christian,” but in reality, only about 8% have a deep, “consequential faith” that they live out day by day.¹⁶ Instead, teens are living out what Dean calls “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,” a somewhat religious approach to life that encompasses the following characteristics,¹⁷

1. An out-of-touch, impersonal god
2. A god who wants people to be good, nice, and happy
3. A god who is not involved in our lives except for emergencies
4. A god who allows everyone to go to heaven when they die

Again, another robust discussion followed with many of the attendees lamenting the challenges of ministering to young people in today’s culture. Students are changing, as is their culture. So what do youth ministers, who are ministering to young people, do? How do they have deep ministries that move “beyond babysitting” so that they are powerfully impactful and life-changing for today’s students?

Seminar Section Three: Your Ministry

The youth minister and the youth ministry team at Suntree United Methodist Church believe that students want more. They want deeper messages, deeper challenges, and greater spiritual/theological training. The third section of this seminar addressed that critical point. It also provided very practical ways in which to accomplish that.

15. Dean, *Almost Christian*, 40-46.

16. Dean, *Almost Christian*, 41.

17. Dean, *Almost Christian*, 14.

As mentioned earlier in this thesis-project, Dallas Willard succinctly put it that we who are in youth ministry need “spiritual heroes” who are strong enough and passionate enough to step up in their faith and become leaders of the way. He added that one of the main problems with this is that churches, and consequently, most youth ministries, are pitching their message “too low.”¹⁸

So how does the church keep from “pitching its message too low” to helping to create and establish true “spiritual heroes” with their young people? How do they inspire teenagers to continually move toward spiritual character and power? In other words, how do youth programs help grow strong Christian young people? This part of the seminar provided nine suggestions to do just that.

1. Christocentric Ministry
2. Develop Quality Relationships w/ PARENTS, Adults, Students
3. Information ... Application ... Implication
4. Leading Up
5. No More “Big Church”
6. Deeper Fun!
7. The Youth Have Left the Building
8. Teenage Spiritual Heroes
9. Make It “Reason-Able”

A powerfully deep youth ministry consists, in part, of these nine elements. And oftentimes, youth programs are able to address these nine elements but do so without the “help” of the local congregation. They fight an uphill battle against a group of leaders and believers (and often times, pastors) who are simply too strong and too set in their ways to overcome. It’s ok if the youth ministry does its thing on the side (for example on Wednesday nights), but Sunday mornings are generally kept off limits. There is a “kids are to be seen and not heard” mentality at many churches regarding Sunday morning

18. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1999), 140.

worship. This is a tragedy. Kenda Creasy Dean puts it this way: “When it comes to vapid Christianity, teenagers are not the problem—the church is the problem. The church is also the solution.”¹⁹

Far too often, students hear the glaring message that they are expected to be present, but are not all that important. The final section of the seminar looked at possible remedies to address that. In essence, participants of the seminar were encouraged to consider helping to create the following: “To develop a Sunday morning worship experience for students that is relevant, significant, deep, exciting, fulfilling, challenging and enjoyable—a place where students are engaged, participating and significant members.”

Finalizing the seminar primarily centered around a discussion based on the wise words and ideas of the twelve “youth ministry experts.” These twelve helped to ground the seminar in years and years of foundational wisdom and “tried and true” praxis. As best as could be distinguished, each participant seemed to enjoy the information and appeared eager to begin to put, at least a portion of it, into practice.

A Final Word and the Three-Fold Partnership

It was a fascinating undertaking surveying committed, Christian young people while, at the same time, also “interviewing” veteran, older and wiser, youth ministry and discipleship experts. The amount of information and the conclusions that were drawn were almost overwhelming. In addition, it was encouraging to see how the information

¹⁹ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 189.

drawn from the various books aligned so well with what the students said and with what the twelve “experts” provided.

As a result, it became increasingly clear that in a deep and healthy church, the youth minister, the parents and adult Christians, and the youth ministry students are all a part of the collective whole, and that group is to be in a beautiful, three-fold partnership. This partnership is to be characterized by love, acceptance, joy, and kindness, and is to be living in the grace and rhythm of God, growing and learning and being transformed as the church body. The youth minister’s responsibility is to be like that of a ship’s captain: to oversee the daily operations, make sure there are no “holes in the vessel,” watch for upcoming dangers, and keep morale and enthusiasm high. But most importantly, as this ship is being guided, the youth minister must do what it takes to bring his or her crew to the intended destination. For a deeper youth ministry, that destination means that they have students who are walking genuinely with God through their relationship with Christ, actively engaged in the life of the church, and enthusiastic about their future as it pertains to Jesus.

APPENDIX A
SEMINAR OUTLINE

Beyond Babysitting: Developing a Deeper Youth Ministry

Joel Lusz
NYWC '11
San Diego, CA

Ephesians 4:11 - 16

11 It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, 12 to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. 15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.

16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

A Change In Youth Ministry

You

V.I.M.

V - ision

I - ntention

M - eans

• Questions

1. Do you have a clear, compelling vision of yourself as a Christ follower?
2. Are you intentionally and passionately moving toward that vision?
3. Have you developed the means and spiritual disciplines in your life to become “mature and attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ?”
4. Are you obeying Christ, not out of guilt, obligation or duty, but rather out of the overflow of your heart?
5. Do you see yourself as an apprentice of Jesus?

• Suggestions

1. Fall in love with the bible (“Don’t just try to get through the bible, get the bible through you.”). Be a “person of the book”
2. Spend unhurried time in solitude and silence, cultivating intimacy with Jesus
3. Read, read, and read
4. Podcast, podcast, and Podcast
5. Get in a group with people who will sharpen you

A Change in *YOUTH* Ministry

M - oralistic

T - herapeutic

D - eism

Dig Deeper!

2. Christocentric Ministry
3. Develop Quality Relationships w/ PARENTS, Adults, Students
4. Information ... Application ... Implication
5. Leading Up
6. No More “Big Church”
7. Deeper Fun!
8. The Youth Have Left the Building
9. Teenage Spiritual Heroes
10. Make It “Reason - Able”

Sunday Morning Worship

What

How

Launch!

Thank You!

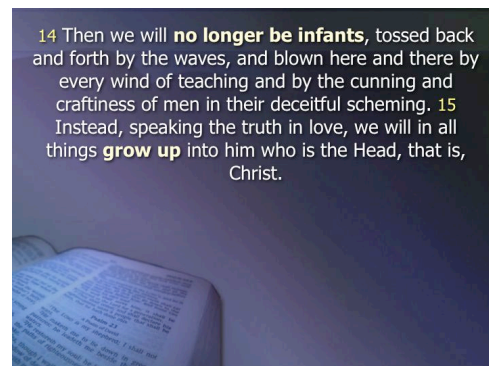
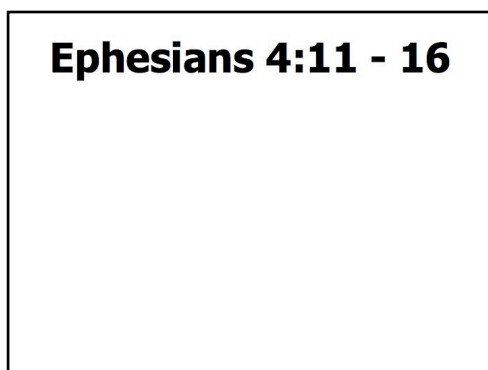
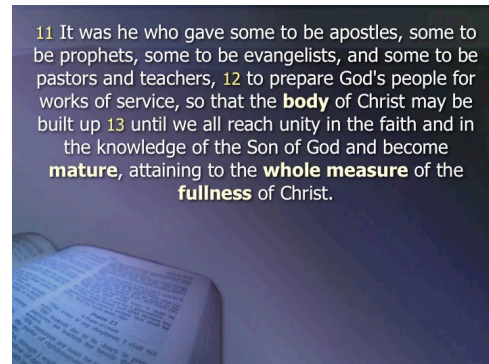
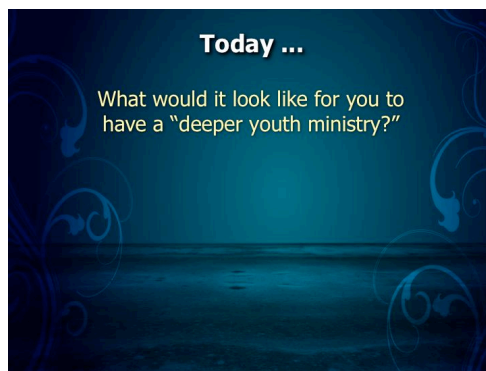
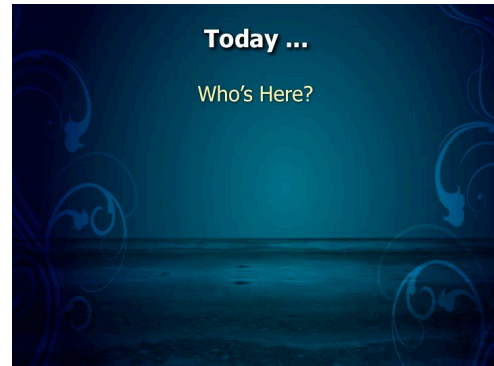


Joel Lusz
GoYouthMinistry.com
Joellusz@me.com
321-432-5235 (cell)

APPENDIX B
POWERPOINT PRESENTATION



**Speak w/ Enthusiasm
and Confidence
Today!**



16 From him the **whole body**, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, **grows** and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Ephesians 4:11-16

Great passage for those of us in youth ministry!

- **Become Mature, so that we're no longer infants**
- **Attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ!**
- **Where we'll have the whole body joined together**



Let's Pray

Have you noticed a change in youth ministry?

If you've been around 10+ years, then you've probably noticed

Heard the story of the older couple:

Driving down the interstate

"We're making great time!"

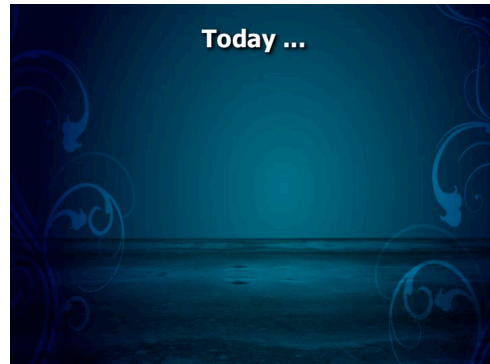
A Change In Youth Ministry



Humbly tell 29 year story

Change: Kids & Approach

Today ...



Challenged to THINK!

**Look at all aspects of your LIFE
(as the leader) and Your
ministry!**

**Encouraging!
As Well As Challenging!**

And ... A LOT of Stuff!!

**And...
HARD Stuff!**

**Hard to take all this
back and apply it!**

You

Youth Pastor, Youth Minister, Point Person,
Volunteer Leader, Youth Director, Etc.

Your Ministry

Middle School, High School, Church, Etc.

You

**Something like:
"You are not going to
take your kids into
deep, spiritual
transformation if you're
not there yourself!"**

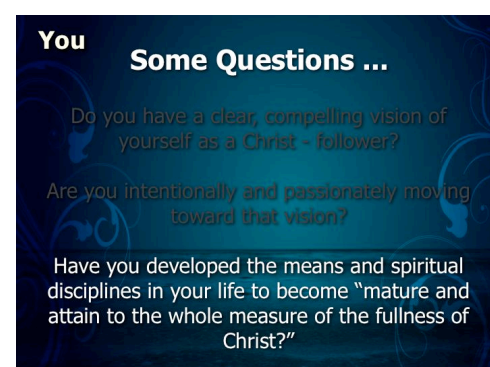
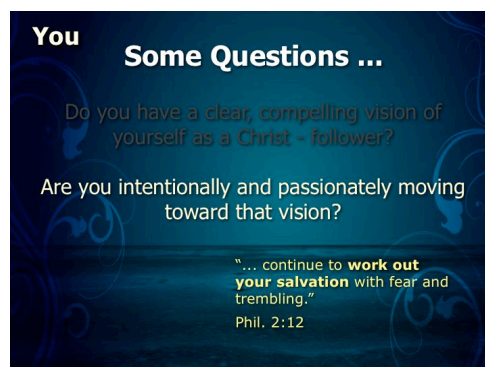
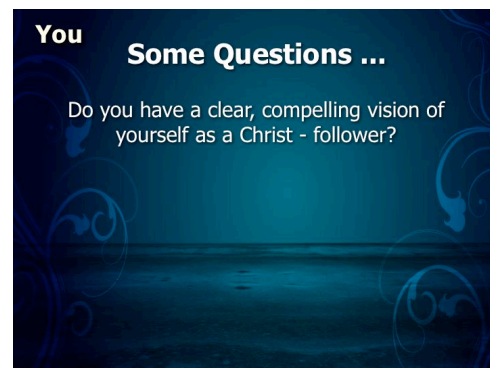
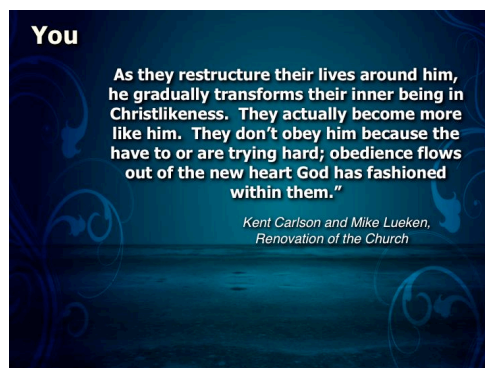
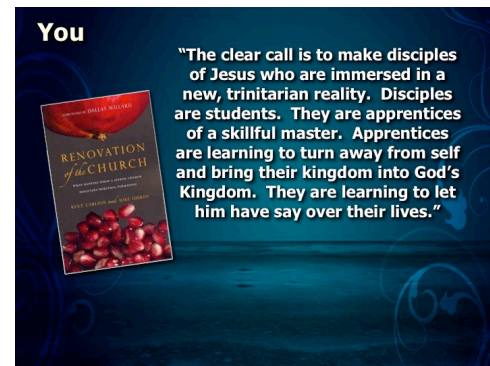
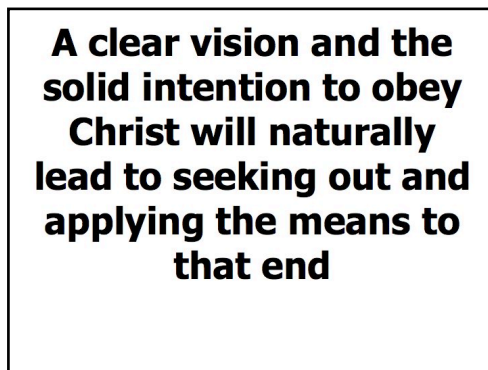
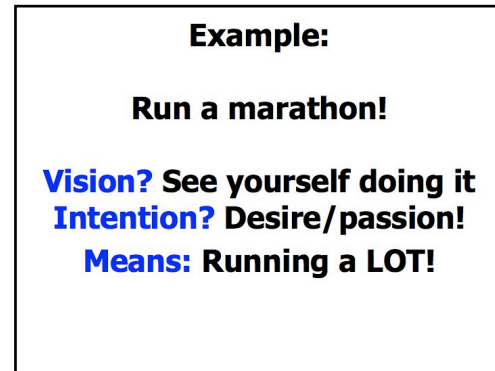
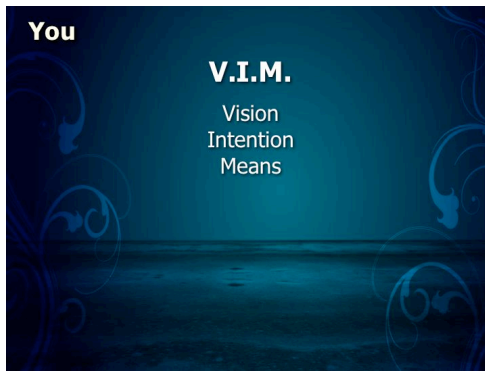
You

"We can say, in a preliminary
manner, that spiritual formation for
the Christian basically refers to the
Spirit-driven process of forming the
inner world of the human self in such
a way that it becomes like the inner
being of Christ himself."

*Dallas Willard, Renovation of the
Heart*



How?



You **Some Questions ...**

Are you obeying Christ, not out of guilt, obligation or duty, but rather out of the overflow of your heart?

You **Some Questions ...**

Are you obeying Christ, not out of guilt, obligation or duty, but rather out of the overflow of your heart?

Do you see yourself as an apprentice of Jesus?

You **Some Suggestions ...**

Fall in love with the bible

**Read for
transformation,
not for
information**

You **Some Suggestions ...**

Fall in love with the bible

Spend unhurried time in solitude and silence, cultivating intimacy with Jesus

You **Some Suggestions ...**

Fall in love with the bible

Spend unhurried time in solitude and silence, cultivating intimacy with Jesus

Read, read and read

You **Some Suggestions ...**

Fall in love with the bible

Spend unhurried time in solitude and silence, cultivating intimacy with Jesus

Read, read and read

Podcast, podcast, and podcast

You **Some Suggestions ...**

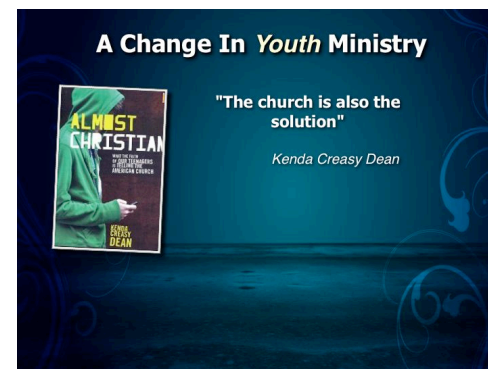
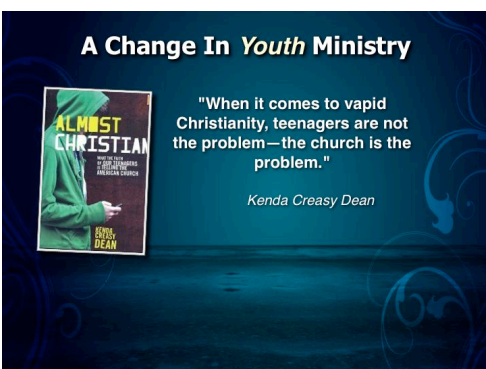
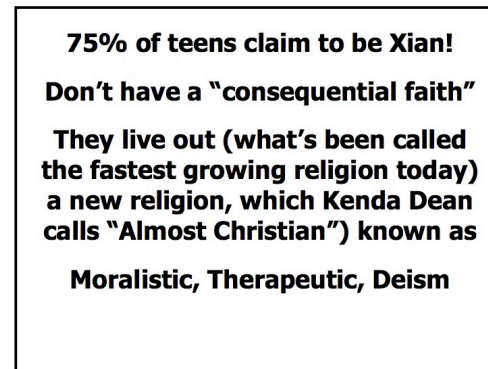
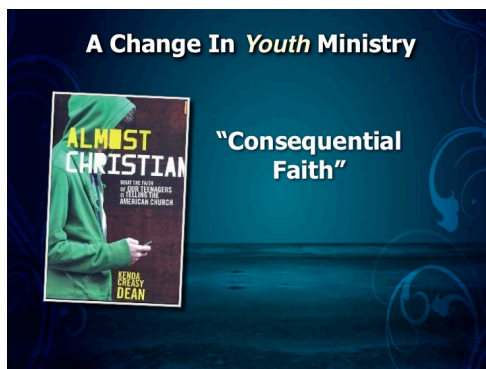
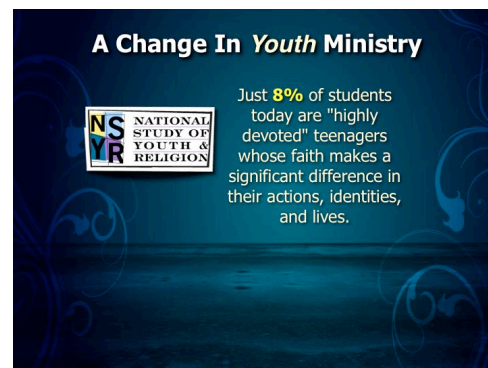
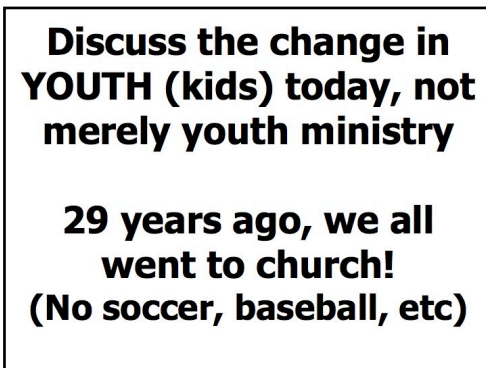
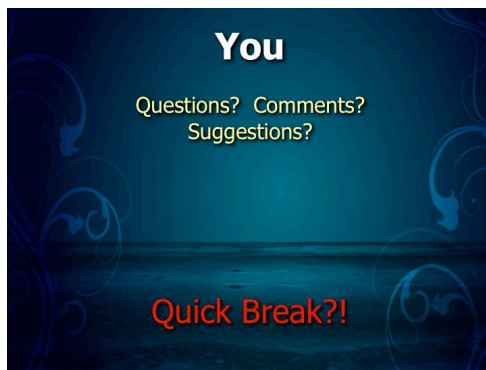
Fall in love with the bible

Spend unhurried time in solitude and silence, cultivating intimacy with Jesus

Read, read and read

Podcast, podcast, and podcast

Get in a group that will sharpen you



A Change In *Youth Ministry*

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

A Change In *Youth Ministry*

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

1. An out-of-touch, impersonal god

A Change In *Youth Ministry*

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

1. An out-of-touch, impersonal god
2. A god who wants people to be good, nice and happy

A Change In *Youth Ministry*

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

1. An out-of-touch, impersonal god
2. A god who wants people to be good, nice and happy
3. A god who's not involved in our lives except for emergencies

A Change In *Youth Ministry*

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

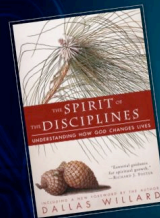
1. An out-of-touch, impersonal god
2. A god who wants people to be good, nice and happy
3. A god who's not involved in our lives except for emergencies
4. A god who allows everyone to go to heaven when they die

**So,
Youth Ministry has changed...
Kids have changed...**

**What do you do? To move
beyond baby sitting and have
a deep, highly impactful
ministry?**

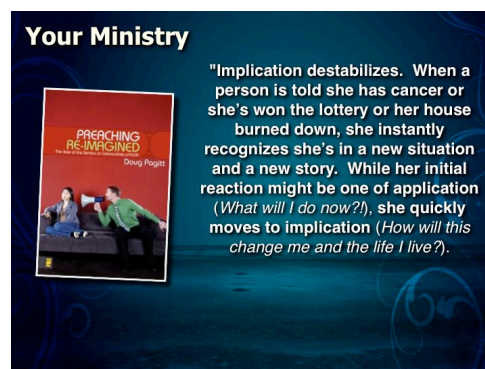
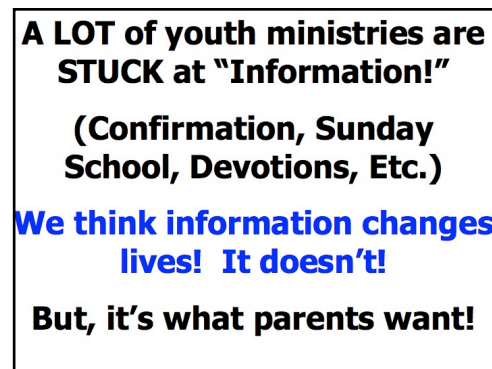
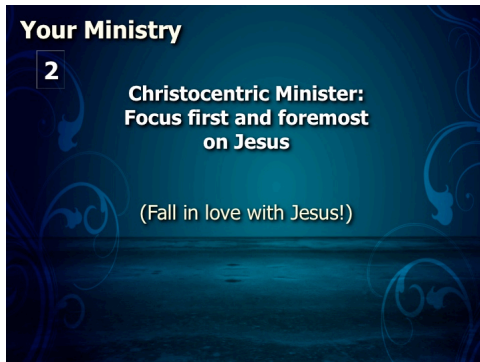
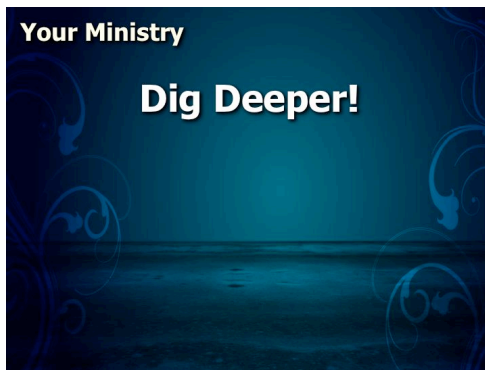
Your Ministry

Your Ministry



"The world can no longer be left to mere diplomats, politicians, and business leaders. They have done the best they could, no doubt. But this is an age for spiritual heroes - a time for men and women to be heroic in their faith and in spiritual character and power. The greatest danger to the Christian church today is that of pitching its message too low."

Dallas Willard, Spirit of the Disciplines



Implication:

"I love Jesus! I don't desire to use profanity. It's no longer who I am!"

Your Ministry

5

Leading Up!

Your Ministry

6

No More "Big Church"

Love them!

See yourself as a
"leader of leaders"

Your Ministry

7

Deeper Fun!

Your Ministry

8

The Youth Have Left The Building!

Service and Missions

Inner World to Outer World

No More "Holy Huddles"

Your Ministry

9

Teenage Spiritual Heroes!

"Push the Ministry Down!"

Make Students "Step Up!"

Your Ministry

10

Make It "Reason - Able"

"Purposely Don't Do Everything, But Do Everything With a Purpose!"

Allows You to Say "No!"

**Once you begin to
INTENTIONALLY do this,
it opens up a whole new
world for you and your
ministry!**

Church Sunday Mornings...

What is your Sunday morning church service like for your kids?

**I know what
I'm about to
discuss is
difficult!**

Your Ministry

Sunday Morning Worship—What

Develop a Sunday morning worship experience for students that is relevant, significant, deep, exciting, fulfilling, challenging and enjoyable.

A place where students are engaged, participating and significant members.

Your Ministry

Sunday Morning Worship—What

Develop a Sunday morning worship experience for students that is relevant, significant, deep, exciting, fulfilling, challenging and enjoyable.

Your Ministry

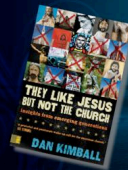
Sunday Morning Worship—How

Pray, pray, pray!

Your Ministry

Sunday Morning Worship—How

Get educated



Your Ministry

Sunday Morning Worship—How

Do a "four week experiment"

Best dates: Sept., May (?)
Worst dates: Jan., June, July, August,
Nov., Dec.

Your Ministry

Sunday Morning Worship—How

Pick a date.
Meet/plan/strategize up till that date

Your Ministry

Sunday Morning Worship—How

Be patient ... take your time

Your Ministry

Sunday Morning Worship—How

Get buy in (in this order)!

1. KEY Student Leaders (3 or so)
2. KEY Adult Leaders (3 or so)
3. Student Leaders
4. Adult Volunteer Leaders
5. Senior Pastor (but, keep him/her "posted")
6. Church Leaders

Your Ministry

Sunday Morning Worship—Launch!

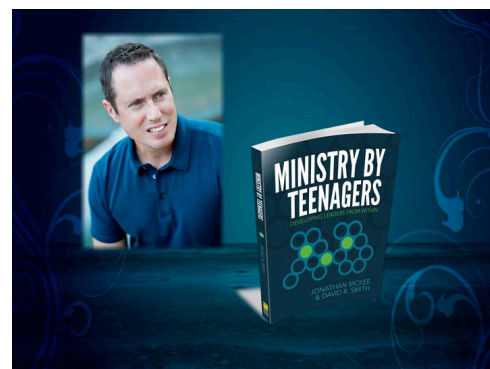
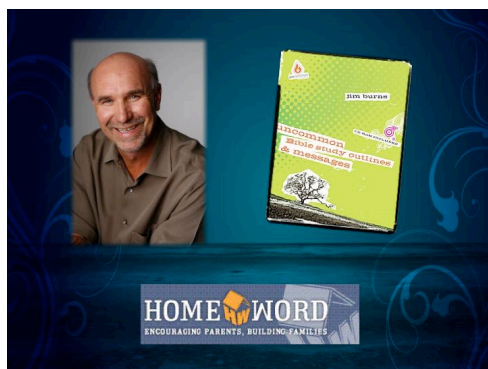
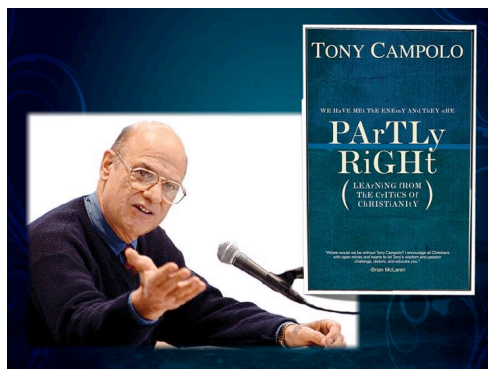
PUT YOUR BEST FOOT FORWARD

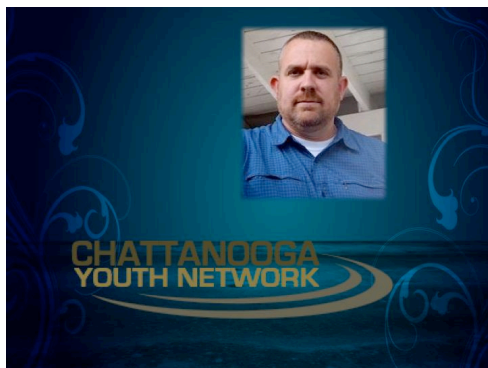
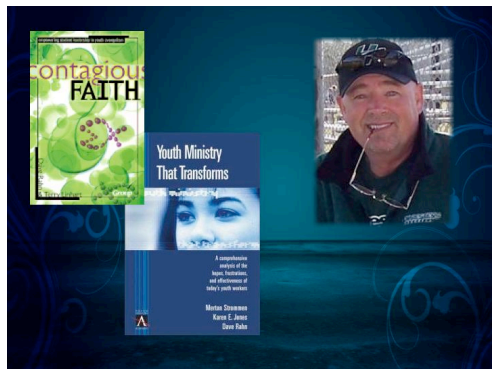
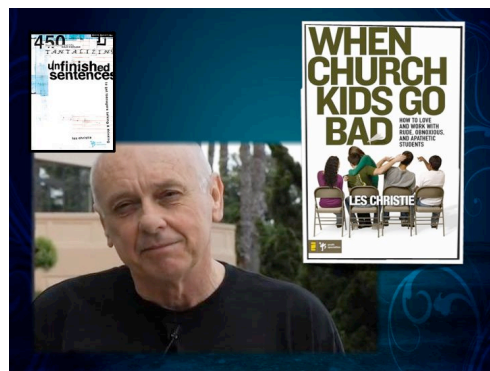
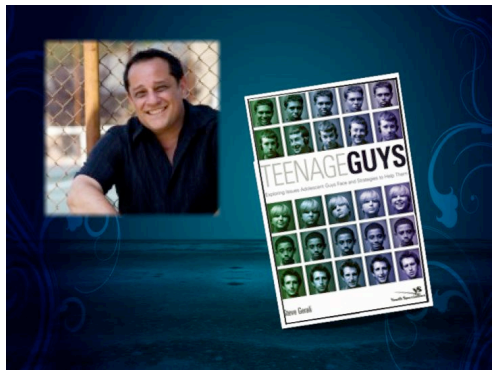
Your Ministry

Sunday Morning Worship—Launch!

PUT YOUR BEST FOOT FORWARD

Declare it "wildly successful!"





Beyond Babysitting:

Developing a Deeper Youth Ministry

Questions? Comments?
Suggestions?

Beyond Babysitting:

Developing a Deeper Youth Ministry

I want to hear your stories!!

Joellusz@me.com

Beyond Babysitting:

Developing a Deeper Youth Ministry

Joel Lus

Thanks!

APPENDIX C
STUDENT SURVEY

My Age Is:

My Gender Is:

1. How long have you been a Christian?
 - a. 0 - 6 months
 - b. 6 months - 1 year
 - c. 1 - 2 years
 - d. 2 - 4 years
 - e. 5+ years
2. What would you say is the **ONE THING** that has helped you to grow the most as a Christian?
3. What does it mean to grow deeper as a Christian?
4. What would help you to grow more as a Christian?
5. As a Christian, what do you have a “great passion” for?

6. In terms of your own growth as a Christian, do your best to rank the following in order of **MOST** helpful (1) to **LEAST** helpful (20). These are in no particular order:

- _____ A Bible Study
- _____ My Small Group
- _____ My Youth Pastor
- _____ Caring Christian Adult(s)
- _____ Sermon/Message
- _____ Sunday School
- _____ Sunday Morning Church
- _____ Youth Group Gathering
- _____ Curriculum
- _____ Camp/Retreat
- _____ Service Project
- _____ Worshipping
- _____ Solitude and/or Quiet
- _____ Mission Trip
- _____ My Parent(s)
- _____ My Friends
- _____ Journaling
- _____ Christian Concert
- _____ Personal Devotions
- _____ Other (_____)

7. Is there one thing in your life as a Christian that most people believe should be really helpful for you, but in actuality has not been very helpful at all? Yes or No.

If yes, what is that: _____

APPENDIX D
EMAIL TO "EXPERTS"

Hey _____!

This is Joel Lusz. Any chance you could answer a question briefly for me? This will be for a DMin project I am in the middle of and for a seminar I will be teaching at this year's NYWC. It would be really helpful. Thanks, and I appreciate it!

Joel

Question: What is it, you think/believe, that youth ministers should do to make their ministries "deep?" (In other words, what should they be doing to help develop deeper, true disciples of Jesus?)

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